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Critical stylistic construction of legal meaning in selected sections of the criminal code act of Nigeria

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Abstract - This study examines the linguistic construction of legal meaning in selected provisions of the Criminal Code Act of Nigeria from the perspective of Critical Stylistics. It investigates how linguistic choices construct legal identities, represent criminal actions, establish relationships, communicate assumptions and reinforce institutional authority in statutory discourse. The study adopts Jeffries's (2010) Critical Stylistics as its sole theoretical framework and employs a qualitative research design based on textual analysis. Six purposively selected provisions of the Criminal Code Act, namely Sections 98, 98A, 316, 383, 418 and 451, constitute the primary data. The analysis focuses on naming and describing, representing actions, events and states, equating and contrasting, exemplifying and enumerating, prioritising, implying and assuming, negating, hypothesising, and representing time, space and society. The findings demonstrate that the selected provisions employ distinctive linguistic resources to identify criminal actors, categorise prohibited conduct, establish conditions of criminal responsibility and prescribe legal consequences. Expressions such as public official, offender, fraudulently, unlawfully, intent to defraud and grievous harm construct specific legal identities and categories of conduct. Enumeration and coordination specify different forms of criminal behaviour, while negation and conditional constructions establish limitations, exceptions and circumstances affecting criminal responsibility. The analysis further reveals that the ordering of information, presupposed legal categories and representations of time contribute to the authority and interpretive structure of statutory provisions. The study concludes that linguistic choices are fundamental to the construction of legal meaning and institutional power in the selected provisions, although their technical and syntactically complex character may affect accessibility for non-specialist readers.

Keywords: critical stylistics, legal English, criminal code act, legal discourse, linguistic choices, legal meaning, statutory language

1. Introduction

Legal English is a specialised variety of language through which laws are formulated, communicated, interpreted and administered. It provides the linguistic resources through which legal institutions define offences, establish rights and obligations, regulate conduct and prescribe consequences for prohibited actions. The language of legislation is therefore not simply a medium for communicating legal rules; it is also an instrument through which institutional authority, societyhips and legally recognised categories are constructed. The selection and organisation of words, expressions and grammatical structures contribute significantly to the meaning and force of statutory provisions.

The Criminal Code Act of Nigeria represents an important example of statutory Legal English. Its provisions employ distinctive lexical, grammatical and syntactic structures to define

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offences, identify offenders, describe criminal conduct and establish circumstances under which particular actions attract legal consequences. Expressions such as any person, public official, intent to defraud, unlawfully, is guilty of a felony and is liable to imprisonment demonstrate the specialised linguistic character of the Code. These expressions perform important functions in identifying participants, representing actions, establishing legal relationships and communicating institutional authority.

The language of the Criminal Code also demonstrates how statutory provisions construct particular representations of social behaviour. Through naming, description, enumeration, negation, conditionality and the organisation of information, legislative language distinguishes lawful conduct from unlawful behaviour and identifies the circumstances under which individuals become subject to criminal responsibility. Such linguistic choices are significant because they determine how persons, actions, relationships and consequences are represented within the statutory text. However, the specialised nature of Legal English may create difficulties for readers who are unfamiliar with legal terminology and conventional legislative expressions. Lengthy sentences, technical vocabulary, embedded clauses and complex qualifications may affect the accessibility of statutory provisions. This raises important questions about the relationship between linguistic precision, institutional authority and public comprehension.

Although Nigerian legal discourse has attracted scholarly attention from linguistic, pragmatic, sociolinguistic and discourse-analytical perspectives, statutory provisions of the Criminal Code require further systematic investigation through critical stylistic analysis. In particular, the linguistic mechanisms through which the Code names legal participants, represents criminal actions, establishes assumptions and constructs relationships of authority deserve closer examination. This study therefore examines selected provisions of the Criminal Code Act of Nigeria using Jeffries's (2010) Critical Stylistics. It investigates how the linguistic organisation of these provisions contributes to the construction of legal meaning, criminal responsibility, institutional authority and society.

Statutory provisions are expected to communicate legal rules with precision, consistency and authority. Nevertheless, the language of the Criminal Code Act contains specialised vocabulary, conventional expressions, complex sentence structures, implicit assumptions and detailed enumerations that may create interpretive difficulties for non-specialist readers. These linguistic features do not merely communicate legal information; they also determine how criminal conduct, individual responsibility, institutional relationships and legal consequences are represented. Although previous studies have examined Nigerian legal language in relation to lexical choices, syntactic structures, legal drafting, judicial discourse and statutory interpretation, the critical stylistic construction of meaning in selected provisions of the Criminal Code has received comparatively limited attention.

In particular, insufficient attention has been given to how legislative language names and describes criminal participants, represents actions and events, establishes relationships through enumeration and contrast, and communicates assumptions and exclusions through linguistic structures. The difficulty, then, is not merely that the Criminal Code uses technical language. It lies in the relationship between the Code's linguistic choices and the construction of legal meaning, a relationship that calls for systematic examination. This study addresses the problem by applying Jeffries's (2010) Critical Stylistics to selected provisions of the Criminal Code Act, paying particular attention to how linguistic structures construct criminal identities, prohibited conduct, legal relationships and institutional authority.

The main aim of this study is to examine the critical stylistic features of selected provisions of the Criminal Code Act of Nigeria and determine how linguistic choices contribute to the construction of legal meaning, criminal responsibility and institutional authority. The specific objectives are to: (1) identify the dominant critical stylistic features in selected provisions of the Criminal Code Act; (2) examine how naming and descriptive choices construct legal participants, identities and categories of criminal conduct; (3) analyse how linguistic structures represent actions, events, states and relationships within statutory provisions; and (4) investigate

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how enumeration, negation, assumptions, conditionality and the organisation of information contribute to the construction of legal meaning and institutional authority.

The study is confined to six provisions of the Criminal Code Act of Nigeria, namely Sections 98, 98A, 316, 383, 418 and 451, which deal respectively with official corruption, giving bribes, murder, stealing, false pretences and malicious injuries to property. Its concern is the linguistic and stylistic organisation of these provisions: how language constructs criminal identities, represents prohibited actions, establishes relationships and communicates legal consequences. The analysis applies nine of the ten textual-conceptual functions in Jeffries's (2010) Critical Stylistics: naming and describing; representing actions, events and states; equating and contrasting; exemplifying and enumerating; prioritising; implying and assuming; negating; hypothesising; and representing time, space and society. The tenth function, presenting others' speech and thought, is excluded because the selected provisions do not report the speech or thought of others. The study does not address the constitutionality, legal validity, judicial interpretation, enforcement or public perception of the provisions; it is concerned with how the statutory text constructs meaning, not with the legal correctness of its content.

Legal English is a specialised register used to formulate and communicate rules, rights, obligations and institutional procedures. It differs from ordinary conversational English in its technical terminology, conventional expressions, formal structures, long and complex sentences, and particular uses of modal verbs. Tiersma (1999) explains that these features follow from the institutional demands of precision, consistency and certainty. Legal vocabulary allows legislators and practitioners to express concepts that have no exact counterpart in everyday speech; terms such as liability, felony, misdemeanour, fraudulent conversion and grievous harm therefore operate as specialised expressions within legal communication.

Bhatia (1993) shows that professional and institutional writing follows conventionalised linguistic practice. Legal documents belong to established genres, and their lexical and grammatical choices respond to institutional expectations and professional convention; legislative language accordingly favours formal, structured expression through which rules can be set out systematically. Gibbons (1999) likewise stresses the value of linguistic analysis for understanding legal communication. Because legal meanings are carried by language, the interpretation of a legal document depends largely on the lexical and grammatical resources used to construct it.

In Nigeria, English is the language of legislation and other official legal communication, a position that reflects the history of the Nigerian legal system and the continuing influence of British legal and administrative tradition. Sharndama and Ijem (2013) identify lexical archaism, compound adverbs, compound prepositions, doublets and the modal shall as recurring features of Nigerian public legal texts, which confirms the conventional and specialised character of legislative language. Research on Nigerian judicial proceedings points the same way: the persistence of archaic expressions demonstrates how lexical choices preserve legal continuity and institutional authority while sometimes creating challenges for accessibility and comprehension (Ogolekwu et al., 2026). Legal English is relevant to this study because of that institutional and linguistic character: the Criminal Code Act offers a suitable text for investigating how specialised expressions, grammatical constructions and textual organisation represent criminal conduct and construct legal meaning.

Stylistics is the systematic study of linguistic choice and its contribution to meaning and textual effect. It examines how writers select and arrange linguistic resources for particular communicative purposes. Although it has traditionally been applied to literary texts, its principles apply equally to non-literary and institutional discourse. Critical Stylistics extends this tradition by asking how linguistic structures build representations of the world and convey underlying assumptions, relationships and ideological positions. In *Critical Stylistics: The Power of English*, Jeffries (2010) combines the close linguistic analysis of stylistics with the critical orientation of discourse analysis, and so provides tools for examining how textual choices construct particular versions of reality.

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Jeffries (2010) identifies ten textual-conceptual functions: naming and describing; representing actions, events and states; equating and contrasting; exemplifying and enumerating; prioritising; implying and assuming; negating; hypothesising; presenting others' speech and thoughts; and representing time, space and society. Together they offer a systematic way of examining how texts are organised linguistically and how specific choices produce meaning. Naming and describing concern how expressions identify and characterise people, objects and concepts; in legal discourse, public official, offender, person, owner and property set up categories of participants and entities. Representing actions, events and states concerns how grammar presents activities, occurrences and conditions, which matters in criminal legislation, where verbs such as takes, converts, receives, destroys and damages represent conduct that may attract legal consequences.

Equating and contrasting concern how language sets up similarity, difference and opposition between entities or concepts, while exemplifying and enumerating concern how texts use examples and lists to specify categories and alternatives. Both are important in legislation, where a single provision often lists several forms of conduct and circumstance. Prioritising looks at how the ordering of information gives some elements prominence; implying and assuming concern meanings treated as established or taken for granted; negating covers expressions that reject, exclude or limit a proposition; and hypothesising covers conditional and hypothetical constructions that represent possible circumstances and consequences.

The framework also considers how texts represent time, space and society. This bears on statutory language because legislation specifies when acts occur, the circumstances in which a rule applies and the social relationships through which responsibility is assigned. The framework suits the present study because it allows the researcher to examine not only the linguistic structures of the Criminal Code but also the meanings and representations that those structures create.

Law depends on language for its communicative force. Legal provisions identify prohibited behaviour, specify the circumstances in which offences arise and state the consequences of particular acts, so the linguistic organisation of statutory texts helps to construct institutional authority. Legal language thus functions not only as a means of conveying statutory provisions but also as a resource for constructing institutional authority, framing criminality and influencing public interpretation (Ogolekwu, 2026). Bhatia (1993) observes that professional discourse is shaped by institutional convention and specialised communicative purpose, a point visible in the formulaic expressions, technical vocabulary and settled grammatical patterns of legal texts. Tiersma (1999) likewise relates the specialised character of legal language to the need for precision and consistency.

The Criminal Code Act of Nigeria illustrates these characteristics in its provisions on offences against persons, property and public authority. Section 98 identifies official corruption through expressions describing public officials who corruptly request, receive or obtain benefits connected with official acts. Section 383 defines stealing through the distinction between taking and converting property, and Section 418 defines false pretence through representations made by words, writing or conduct.

These provisions show how statutory language establishes legal categories through naming, description and the representation of actions. Expressions such as any person, public official, fraudulently, unlawfully and intent to defraud fix the participants and circumstances represented in the text. The Code also exposes the tension between legal precision and accessibility. Garner (2013) argues for clear, comprehensible legal writing that communicates effectively with its intended readers, and the concern applies to statutes, where technical terminology and complex grammar may make provisions hard for citizens without specialist knowledge. The Criminal Code therefore offers a valuable setting for a critical stylistic enquiry into how statutory language constructs legal identities, represents criminal conduct and reinforces institutional authority.

Research on Nigerian legal language has examined lexical, syntactic, pragmatic and discourse features across several kinds of legal communication, and this work provides a

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foundation for studying the stylistic organisation of statutory provisions. Ononye's (2008) master's thesis, "A Stylistic Investigation of Select Supreme Court Judgement Text in Nigeria," analyses six Supreme Court lead judgments and considers their contextual, graphological, morphological, lexico-semantic, syntactic and pragmatic features. It shows that stylistic analysis suits Nigerian legal discourse, but its object is judicial judgments, not the statutory definition of criminal offences.

Sharndama and Ijem's (2013) study of lexical archaism in two Nigerian statutes finds that compound adverbs, compound prepositions, legal doublets, modal expressions and Latin and French technical terms characterise legal language. Conventional and archaic forms, they show, give legal documents their specialised character but can be difficult for non-specialist readers. The study matters here because it establishes the weight of lexical choice in Nigerian statutory language; however, it concentrates on archaism rather than on the wider textual-conceptual functions through which legal meaning is built.

Mbanugo and Ezeifeka (2023) use qualitative textual analysis to examine register choices in "An Analysis of Linguistic Choices in Legal Drafting." They report that legal language is highly technical and that specialised vocabulary and professional expressions can limit lay readers' understanding of legal documents. The study links linguistic choice to accessibility but does not apply Jeffries's (2010) Critical Stylistics to the Criminal Code. Alli (2014), in "The Use of Language in Criminal Procedures Code (CPC) and the Nigeria Police Act and Regulations: A Critical Perspective," examines linguistic problems in legal and administrative documents and argues that vague or indeterminate expressions can make statutory interpretation uncertain; the study recommends ways of reducing ambiguity. Like the present study, it is concerned with language and legal meaning, but its materials are the Criminal Procedure Code and the Police Act, not the Criminal Code Act.

Recent work on Nigerian judicial and institutional discourse has also drawn attention to the organisation of legal language. Ekpang and Ogolekwu (2024), in a socio-legal discourse analysis of a selected court proceeding, show that the organisation of courtroom discourse through exchanges, moves and communicative acts demonstrates the relationship between linguistic structures and the construction of meaning. Ogolekwu et al. (2026) study legalese as an instrument of the fossilization of language in Nigerian judicial proceedings and show how archaic expressions preserve legal continuity and institutional authority, although they may hinder accessibility and comprehension. Ogolekwu (2026a), in a forensic stylistic study of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) press releases, shows that legal language is also a resource for framing criminality and influencing public interpretation. These studies, however, concern court proceedings and institutional press releases and not the statutory provisions of the Criminal Code Act.

Most recently, Alagolo (2026), in "A Pragmasemantic Analysis of Lexical Ambiguity in the Nigeria Criminal Code Act," studies lexical ambiguity in selected provisions of the Act, drawing on Pustejovsky's semantic qualia structure and Gricean pragmatics to identify ambiguous expressions and consider their implications for legal interpretation. Because it engages the Criminal Code directly, it is the closest of the reviewed studies to this one, but it concentrates on lexical ambiguity and pragmatic interpretation rather than on the range of textual-conceptual functions that Critical Stylistics examines. Taken together, the reviewed studies show that Nigerian legal language has been approached from several linguistic angles, yet there is still scope for a systematic examination of how the Criminal Code constructs legal meaning through naming, the representation of actions, enumeration, contrast, negation, assumption and conditionality. The present study addresses this gap by applying Jeffries's (2010) Critical Stylistics to selected provisions of the Criminal Code Act of Nigeria.

This study adopts Jeffries's (2010) Critical Stylistics as its sole theoretical framework. The theory suits statutory discourse because legal provisions do more than describe actions: they construct identities, define relationships, assign responsibilities and regulate behaviour through language. Of the ten textual-conceptual functions Jeffries (2010) proposes, nine are applied here. Naming and describing are used to examine how the Criminal Code identifies individuals,

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institutions, objects and categories of criminal conduct, and representing actions, events and states to investigate how prohibited acts, intentions and consequences are constructed linguistically. Equating and contrasting, together with exemplifying and enumerating, reveal how provisions set up distinctions, alternatives and classifications. Prioritising examines which information is foregrounded; implying and assuming identify meanings presented as presupposed or indirectly conveyed; and negating examines expressions that exclude or limit what the law requires. Hypothesising addresses the conditional expressions that link legal consequences to specified acts or circumstances, and representing time, space and society addresses the temporal, spatial and social circumstances in which criminal responsibility arises. The tenth function, presenting others' speech and thought, is not applied because the selected provisions do not report the speech or thought of others. Applying these functions allows the study to move from identifying individual features to explaining how they produce legal meaning, institutional authority and criminal responsibility, and so gives Jeffries's framework an appropriate analytical basis for examining language, representation and meaning in the Nigerian Criminal Code.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative design based on textual and critical stylistic analysis, which suits an investigation of how linguistic structures construct meaning, as opposed to one that measures linguistic variables statistically. The population is the Criminal Code Act of Nigeria, Cap. C38, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004, from which six sections were purposively selected: Sections 98, 98A, 316, 383, 418 and 451 (see the Appendix). They were chosen because they contain varied linguistic structures suited to the textual-conceptual functions identified by Jeffries (2010). The primary data are excerpts drawn directly from these provisions and numbered in the order in which they are analysed. The original wording is retained to preserve the structures under investigation; where only certain clauses are needed, the relevant portions are reproduced without alteration. Data collection involved identifying the selected provisions, extracting relevant linguistic expressions and organising them under the analytical categories of Critical Stylistics: naming and describing; representing actions, events and states; equating and contrasting; exemplifying and enumerating; prioritising; implying and assuming; negating; hypothesising; and representing time, space and society. Each excerpt is examined within its statutory context to determine how its linguistic organisation constructs legal participants, criminal conduct, relationships, conditions and consequences. Interpretation concentrates on the textual and stylistic functions of linguistic choices, not on the legal validity or enforcement of the provisions. The statutory source is the Criminal Code Act, Cap. C38, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004, as reproduced in the legislative text consulted (see References).

2.2 Data Presentation and Discussion

The analysis examines selected provisions of the Criminal Code Act through the textual-conceptual functions of Jeffries's (2010) Critical Stylistics. Four analytical areas (Sections 5.1 to 5.4) show how linguistic choices construct legal participants, represent criminal conduct, establish relationships and communicate institutional authority.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

3.1.1 Naming and Describing

Naming and describing constitute important textual-conceptual functions through which language identifies, classifies and characterises people, objects, actions and concepts. In statutory discourse, naming establishes the participants and entities to which legal rules apply, while descriptive expressions provide information about their characteristics, status and relationships. These choices are significant because they determine how individuals and actions are categorised within the legal framework.

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Excerpt 1: Official Corruption (Section 98(1)

> Any public official (as defined in section 98D) who—(a) corruptly asks for, receives or obtains any property or benefit of any kind for himself or any other person; or (b) corruptly agrees or attempts to receive or obtain any property or benefit of any kind for himself or any other person, on account of—(i) anything already done or omitted, or any favour or disfavour already shown to any person, by himself in the discharge of his official duties or in relation to any matter connected with the functions, affairs or business of a government department, public body or other organisation or institution in which he is serving as a public official; or (ii) anything to be afterwards done or omitted, or any favour or disfavour to be afterwards shown to any person, by himself in the discharge of his official duties or in relation to any such matter as aforesaid, is guilty of the felony of official corruption and is liable to imprisonment for seven years. (Criminal Code Act, 2004, sec. 98(1)).

Excerpt 1 demonstrates naming and describing through expressions such as public official, property, benefit, government department, public body and official duties. The expression public official identifies a particular category of participant whose institutional position is central to the offence. Its meaning is further qualified by the parenthetical expression "as defined in section 98D", which directs the reader to a statutory definition rather than leaving the category to ordinary interpretation.

The expression property or benefit of any kind identifies the objects involved in the alleged corrupt transaction. The addition of of any kind broadens the descriptive category beyond a narrowly specified item. Similarly, government department, public body or other organisation or institution identifies the institutional environments within which the relevant official functions may be performed. These expressions construct a relationship between the individual, the benefit sought or received and the institution in which the individual exercises public authority. The adjective corruptly is particularly significant because it characterises the manner in which the actions are performed. It does not merely identify an action but evaluates its legal character within the statutory context. Through this combination of naming and description, the provision establishes the participants, objects, institutional settings and behavioural characteristics associated with official corruption.

Excerpt 2: Definition of False Pretence (Section 418)

> Any representation made by words, writing, or conduct, of a matter of fact, either past or present, which representation is false in fact and which the person making it knows to be false or does not believe to be true, is a false pretence. (Criminal Code Act, 2004, sec. 418).

Excerpt 2 illustrates naming and describing through the expression any representation, which identifies the central concept being defined. The provision further describes the possible forms of representation as "words, writing, or conduct". This enumeration broadens the category beyond spoken or written communication to include behaviour through which a false representation may be made. The expression a matter of fact establishes the nature of the information represented, while either past or present describes its temporal scope. The phrases false in fact, knows to be false and does not believe to be true further characterise the representation and the mental state of the person making it. The provision thus constructs false pretence through a combination of the nature of the representation, its relationship with factual reality and the knowledge or belief attributed to its maker. The analysis of both excerpts demonstrates that naming and describing are central to the construction of statutory meaning. Through carefully selected nouns, adjectives and descriptive expressions, the Criminal Code establishes categories of persons, institutional relationships and legally significant conduct.

3.1.2 Representing Actions, Events and States

Representing actions, events and states is concerned with how linguistic structures present activities, occurrences, processes and conditions. Jeffries (2010) considers the grammatical

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representation of events important because the choice of verbs and the arrangement of participants determine how actions are presented within a text. In criminal legislation, this function is particularly significant because statutory provisions define offences through descriptions of conduct and the circumstances surrounding it.

Excerpt 3: Definition of Stealing (Section 383(1))

> A person who fraudulently takes anything capable of being stolen, or fraudulently converts to his own use or to the use of any other person anything capable of being stolen, is said to steal that thing. (Criminal Code Act, 2004, sec. 383(1)).

Excerpt 3 demonstrates the representation of actions through the verbs takes and converts. These verbs identify two different forms of conduct through which stealing may occur. The adverb fraudulently qualifies both actions and establishes the manner in which they are represented. The provision therefore does not classify every taking or conversion as stealing; it attaches a particular descriptive condition to the actions. The expression to his own use or to the use of any other person further expands the representation of conversion by identifying alternative beneficiaries of the action. This construction makes the provision applicable to situations in which property is converted either for the benefit of the individual involved or for another person. The concluding expression is said to steal that thing provides the statutory classification of the preceding actions. The provision therefore moves from the representation of conduct to its legal categorisation. The sequence illustrates how verbal choices establish the relationship between an action and the legal concept used to identify it.

Excerpt 4: Definition of Murder (Section 316)

> Except as hereinafter set forth, a person who unlawfully kills another under any of the following circumstances, that is to say (1) if the offender intends to cause the death of the person killed, or that of some other person; (2) if the offender intends to do to the person killed or to some other person some grievous harm; (3) if death is caused by means of an act done in the prosecution of an unlawful purpose, which act is of such a nature as to be likely to endanger human life;is guilty of murder. (Criminal Code Act, 2004, sec. 316, selected subsections).

Excerpt 4 demonstrates the representation of actions, events and states through the verbs kills, intends, cause and endanger. The verb kills represents the central action, while intends introduces the mental process attributed to the offender. This distinction is important because the provision represents criminal conduct through both physical actions and the intention associated with them. The expression death is caused is a passive construction that presents death as the resulting event without immediately identifying the grammatical agent responsible for causing it. The phrase an act done in the prosecution of an unlawful purpose further represents conduct through a nominalised expression, connecting the action to the purpose behind it.

The provision also employs the expression is guilty of murder to classify the represented conduct within a legal category. The grammatical movement from the description of an action and its circumstances to the classification of the offence demonstrates how statutory language constructs criminal responsibility. The two excerpts reveal that the Criminal Code uses verbal and nominal structures to represent actions, mental processes, events and states. These linguistic choices establish the relationship between conduct, intention and the legal categories through which offences are defined.

3.1.3 Equating, Contrasting, Exemplifying and Enumerating

Equating and contrasting are textual-conceptual functions through which language establishes relationships of similarity, difference and opposition between concepts. Exemplifying and enumerating involve the presentation of specific instances, categories or alternatives to explain the scope of a proposition. These functions are particularly important in statutory language because legislation frequently uses lists and distinctions to identify the different forms of conduct covered by a provision.

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Excerpt 5: Giving Bribes on Account of Actions of a Public Official (Section 98A(1))

> Any person who (a) corruptly gives, confers or procures any property or benefit of any kind to, on or for a public official […] or to, on or for any other person; or (b) corruptly promises or offers to give or confer or to procure or attempt to procure any property or benefit of any kind to, on or for a public official or to, on or for any other person, on account of any such act, omission, favour or disfavour on the part of the public official as is mentioned in section 98(1)(i) or (ii) of this Code, is guilty of the felony of official corruption and is liable to imprisonment for seven years. (Criminal Code Act, 2004, sec. 98A(1)).

Excerpt 5 demonstrates exemplification and enumeration through the coordinated expressions "gives, confers or procures" and "promises or offers". These verbs identify different forms through which a benefit may be provided or made available to a public official or another person. The provision further enumerates the possible recipients through the expression "to, on or for a public official […] or to, on or for any other person". The repeated conjunction or introduces alternatives rather than presenting the listed actions as a single compulsory sequence. Consequently, the provision covers different forms of conduct that may independently fall within the statutory description. The expression any property or benefit of any kind also broadens the scope of the objects involved in the transaction.

The relationship between Sections 98 and 98A is particularly significant. Section 98 addresses the conduct of the public official who requests, receives or agrees to receive a benefit, whereas Section 98A addresses the person who gives, confers, promises or offers the benefit in connection with the official's actions. The two provisions therefore construct complementary categories of participants in official corruption. Their linguistic organisation establishes a distinction between the receiving and giving sides of the transaction while connecting both through the concept of official corruption.

Excerpt 6: Malicious Injuries in General (Section 451)

> Any person who wilfully and unlawfully destroys or damages any property, is guilty of an offence, which, unless otherwise stated, is a misdemeanour and he is liable, if no other punishment is provided, to imprisonment for two years. (Criminal Code Act, 2004, sec. 451).

Excerpt 6 demonstrates contrasting and enumerative functions through the expressions destroys or damages, offence and misdemeanour. The verbs "destroys" and "damages" identify two related but distinguishable forms of conduct affecting property. The conjunction or establishes alternative actions through which the offence may be committed. The provision also distinguishes between the general classification of the conduct as an offence and its further classification as a misdemeanour, subject to the qualification "unless otherwise stated". This qualification introduces a distinction between the general rule and circumstances in which another statutory provision may prescribe a different classification or punishment.

The expressions if no other punishment is provided and unless otherwise stated establish qualifications that prevent the general punishment clause from operating without regard to other applicable statutory provisions. Thus, the provision does not simply describe property damage; it establishes a general category while recognising possible distinctions within the wider legislative framework. The analysis demonstrates that enumeration, coordination and contrast contribute to the specification of legal categories and the relationship between different forms of conduct. Through these linguistic functions, the Criminal Code establishes alternatives, distinctions and complementary categories that determine the scope of statutory provisions.

3.1.4 Prioritising, Implying and Assuming, Negating, Hypothesising, and Representing Time, Space and Society

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This section examines the remaining textual-conceptual functions relevant to the selected provisions. These include the organisation of information, the construction of implicit meanings, the expression of negation, the establishment of hypothetical conditions and the representation of temporal and societyhips.

Prioritising concerns the arrangement of textual information in ways that give prominence to particular participants, actions or consequences. In statutory discourse, the opening position of a provision is often occupied by an expression identifying the person whose conduct is being regulated. In Section 98(1), the provision begins with "Any public official", immediately establishing the participant to whom the rule applies. The description of the prohibited conduct follows through the coordinated expressions "corruptly asks for, receives or obtains" and "corruptly agrees or attempts to receive or obtain". The provision then introduces the relevant official circumstances before concluding with "is guilty of the felony of official corruption and is liable to imprisonment for seven years".

This arrangement gives prominence to the identity of the regulated participant before presenting the conduct and its consequences. The final position of the legal classification and punishment also gives them prominence as the outcome of the preceding description. In Section 383(1), the provision similarly begins with "A person who", followed by the actions of taking or converting property. It concludes with "is said to steal that thing". This structure foregrounds the participant and the relevant actions before providing the legal classification. The organisation of information therefore contributes to the progression from the identification of a person to the definition of prohibited conduct.

Implying and assuming examine information presented as established or taken for granted within a text. Legal provisions frequently depend on established legal categories and relationships that are not fully explained within every individual clause. Section 98(1) uses the expression "Any public official (as defined in section 98D)". The phrase presupposes that a legally identifiable category of public officials exists and directs the reader to an earlier statutory definition. The use of any further presents the category as generally applicable to all persons who satisfy the statutory definition. Similarly, Section 383(1) employs the expression "anything capable of being stolen". This phrase presupposes a distinction between objects that can legally be stolen and those that cannot. The provision therefore depends on an established legal classification of property and its capacity to become the subject of stealing. In Section 451, the expression "any property" similarly assumes that the object of destruction or damage can be identified within an established category of property. These expressions demonstrate that statutory meaning may depend on information supplied elsewhere in the Code or treated as already established within its legal context.

Negation involves the use of linguistic structures to reject, exclude or limit a proposition. It is particularly significant in statutory discourse because legal provisions may specify circumstances in which a particular action, intention or defence is not recognised. Section 418 employs the expression "does not believe to be true". The negative auxiliary does not establishes an alternative mental condition associated with the representation. The provision identifies a representation as a false pretence where the person making it either knows it to be false or does not believe it to be true.

Section 316 also employs the expression "it is immaterial that the offender did not intend to hurt the particular person who is killed". The negative construction did not intend excludes a particular intention from being necessary in the circumstance described. The provision thereby establishes that the absence of an intention to hurt the particular person does not alter the statutory classification under the specified condition. Similarly, Section 383(3) provides that "the taking or conversion may be fraudulent, although it is effected without secrecy or attempts at concealment". This construction rejects the assumption that secrecy or concealment must necessarily accompany fraudulent taking or conversion. Negation therefore plays an important role in specifying what is not required for particular conduct to fall within the statutory definition.

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Hypothesising concerns the construction of possible situations and the conditions under which particular propositions or consequences apply. In legislation, conditional expressions establish the circumstances in which a rule becomes relevant. Section 316 repeatedly employs the conditional conjunction if to introduce circumstances under which unlawful killing constitutes murder. The expressions "if the offender intends to cause the death" and "if death is caused by means of an act done in the prosecution of an unlawful purpose" introduce distinct conditions associated with the statutory definition. Section 451 similarly uses the expression "if no other punishment is provided". This introduces a condition under which the general punishment stated in the provision applies. The conditional structure therefore makes the punishment dependent on the absence of another applicable statutory prescription. In Section 418, the expression "which the person making it knows to be false or does not believe to be true" also establishes alternative conditions relating to the mental state of the person making the representation. These constructions show that the Code uses conditional and alternative formulations to establish the circumstances under which particular legal classifications and consequences arise.

This textual-conceptual function examines how language represents temporal relationships, spatial circumstances and social arrangements. Statutory provisions frequently distinguish between past actions, present circumstances and future possibilities, while identifying relationships between individuals and institutions. Section 98(1) provides a clear example through the contrast between "anything already done or omitted" and "anything to be afterwards done or omitted". The expressions already and afterwards establish a temporal distinction between completed and anticipated official actions. This enables the provision to encompass benefits connected with both past official conduct and actions expected to occur in the future.

Section 418 similarly uses "either past or present" to establish the temporal scope of the factual representation involved in false pretence. The expression indicates that the representation may concern a matter of fact relating to either of these temporal categories. The social dimension is particularly evident in Section 98, which identifies relationships among a public official, a person providing or receiving a benefit and the government department or public body in which the official serves. These expressions construct a social and institutional relationship in which public authority is exercised through official duties and institutional responsibilities. The analysis therefore demonstrates that the selected provisions employ prioritisation, assumptions, negation, conditionality and temporal expressions to organise legal information and establish the circumstances under which statutory rules apply. These functions contribute to the construction of legal meaning by making particular identities, relationships, conditions and consequences linguistically explicit or implicitly established.

3.2 Discussion

The findings reveal that selected provisions of the Nigerian Criminal Code employ distinctive linguistic choices through which criminal conduct, legal identities, responsibilities and consequences are constructed. The analysis demonstrates that naming and describing establish categories of persons, actions and objects, thereby providing the conceptual foundation for defining criminal offences. The representation of actions, events and states further specifies prohibited conduct and connects individual actions with legally recognised consequences.

The findings also show that equating, contrasting and enumerating contribute to the classification of offences by presenting alternative actions, conditions and circumstances within individual provisions. Prioritisation determines how particular participants, actions and consequences are foregrounded, while implication and assumption enable statutory provisions to communicate meanings that extend beyond their explicitly stated expressions. These features demonstrate that statutory meaning is shaped not only by vocabulary but also by the organisation and presentation of information.

Furthermore, the representation of time, space and society establishes the circumstances within which particular actions become legally significant. Hypothesising, particularly through conditional constructions, connects specified conduct with possible legal consequences.

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Collectively, these linguistic functions reveal how the Criminal Code uses language to establish criminal categories, regulate behaviour and communicate institutional authority. The findings affirm the relevance of Jeffries's (2010) Critical Stylistics in explaining how statutory language constructs meaning and represents societyhips. They also demonstrate that the linguistic organisation of criminal legislation contributes to legal precision and authority, although its specialised expressions and structural complexity may present challenges to non-specialist readers.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between legal English, linguistic form and meaning in selected sections of the Nigerian Criminal Code, using Jeffries's (2010) Critical Stylistics as its theoretical framework. The analysis demonstrates that the language of criminal law is not merely a means of communicating legal rules; it is also a carefully structured linguistic system through which criminal conduct, responsibility and legal consequences are defined and established. The findings reveal that naming and describing, the representation of actions and events, enumeration, contrast, prioritisation, presupposition and conditional constructions contribute significantly to the construction of legal meaning. These linguistic features help to identify prohibited actions, distinguish criminal conduct from other forms of behaviour and establish the conditions under which legal responsibility may arise. Furthermore, the study shows that the distinctive vocabulary, grammatical structures and sentence patterns of the Criminal Code contribute to its precision and authoritative character. However, some of these linguistic features may present interpretative difficulties for readers without legal training. The study therefore concludes that Critical Stylistics provides a useful framework for examining how linguistic choices shape meaning and authority in legal texts, particularly the Nigerian Criminal Code.

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Appendix

Selected Provisions of the Criminal Code Act and Their Place in the Analysis

The table lists the six sections of the Criminal Code Act, Cap. C38, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004, selected for analysis, the excerpt in which each is reproduced, and the sections of the paper in which it is discussed.

Excerpt	Section	Subject	Analysed in
1	98(1)	Official corruption	5.1; 5.4.1; 5.4.2; 5.4.5 (also compared with Section 98A in 5.3)
2	418	Definition of false pretence	5.1; 5.4.3; 5.4.4; 5.4.5
3	383(1)	Definition of stealing	5.2; 5.4.1; 5.4.2 (Section 383(3) is quoted in 5.4.3)
4	316	Definition of murder	5.2; 5.4.3; 5.4.4
5	98A(1)	Giving bribes on account of actions of a public official	5.3
6	451	Malicious injuries in general	5.3; 5.4.2; 5.4.4

Source of the statutory text: Criminal Code Act, Cap. C38, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria (2004), as reproduced by the Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC), https://www.placng.org/lawsofnigeria/laws/C38.pdf. The excerpts in Section 5 reproduce the wording of the provisions without alteration; omissions are marked […].