
The Use of Coercive Language in Interrogation: A Preliminary Study in Forensic Linguistics

Pontianus Cahyono La'ia¹, Mirsa Umiyati²

Universitas Warmadewa¹, Universitas Dhyana Pura²

pontianuscahyo12@gmail.com¹, mirsa.umiya2@gmail.com²

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Abstract- This article examines the use of coercive language in interrogation practices from a forensic linguistics perspective. Language in interrogations serves not only as a means of communication but also as a tool of power that can be used to shape, influence, and even manipulate the responses of the subject being interrogated. This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive method, utilizing secondary data in the form of interrogation transcripts, excerpts from investigative interviews, and academic references. The analysis is based on Speech Act Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis. The findings reveal five main forms of coercive language commonly used in interrogations: veiled threats, forceful affirmations, leading questions, strategic repetition, and emotional appeals. Each form carries various pragmatic functions and has significant psychological impacts on the subject, especially in situations of power imbalance. This study highlights the importance of critical awareness regarding the role of language in legal practices and the urgency of ethical regulations in the use of language during interrogations, in order to uphold the integrity of the judicial process and protect human rights.

Keywords: Interrogation, Forensic Linguistics, Coercive Language, Speech Act, Discourse of Power.

I. INTRODUCTION

Language plays a strategic role in various aspects of life, including in the practice of law enforcement. In the context of interrogation, language does not merely function as a tool of communication but also serves as an instrument of power that can influence the behavior, thoughts, and even decisions of the individual being questioned. Interrogations conducted by law enforcement officers aim to obtain information or confessions from suspects or witnesses. However, behind this process lies a range of linguistic strategies used to pressure or steer the subject's responses, one of which is the use of coercive language.

Coercive language is part of linguistic strategies designed to create specific psychological conditions during interrogation. It can take the form of veiled threats, emotional persuasion, direct commands, leading questions, or mentally exhausting strategic repetition. For instance, statements such as "If you confess now, your sentence might be lighter" or "We already know you did it; it's just a matter of whether you admit it or not" are examples of verbal manipulation commonly used in interrogation practices. The use of such language can significantly affect the subject's response and, in some cases, may even lead to false confessions.

The study of language use in interrogations falls under the field of forensic linguistics, a branch of applied linguistics that examines language within legal and judicial contexts. According to Coulthard and Johnson (2010), forensic linguistics aims to uncover how language is used to shape and influence legal events, including during interrogations and trials. Language in legal processes is not neutral; it carries manipulative and persuasive potential. This aligns with Gibbons (2003), who argues that power imbalances in legal settings are often reflected through language control, where one party (the interrogator) unilaterally frames the interaction.

Theoretically, this research draws on Speech Act Theory as proposed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). Austin asserted that when a person speaks, they are not only conveying information but also performing a certain act. In interrogations, utterances such as threats or persuasion are illocutionary acts that psychologically impact the subject. Searle (1969) further explained that speech acts serve to declare, command, question, or express emotion—all of which are closely tied to power relations. In this context, verbal commands and pressure in interrogations are forms of linguistic domination.

Furthermore, the Critical Discourse Analysis approach (Fairclough, 1995) is essential for understanding that discourse is not merely a reflection of social reality but also a tool for producing and reproducing power. Language in interrogation, therefore, must be understood as a social act with legal and ethical implications. Empirical research by Kassin et al. (2010) shows that verbally coercive interrogation techniques can trigger false confessions, especially when the subject is under stress or psychologically unprepared. Similarly, Leo (2008) emphasizes that modern interrogation relies more on psychological manipulation through language than on physical pressure, making linguistic aspects a key element that must be critically examined.

Olsson (2008) even argues that linguistic evidence in legal proceedings can be as important as physical evidence, since language shapes interpretation, intention, and even verdicts. Therefore, understanding language use in interrogations is crucial to ensuring objectivity and justice in legal processes. Unfortunately, in Indonesia, linguistic studies on interrogation practices remain scarce, even

though this practice holds significant potential as a subject of in-depth research, particularly in the context of human rights protection. This article aims to identify and analyze the forms of coercive language that appear during interrogations from a forensic linguistic perspective. This study is preliminary in nature and is expected to open avenues for more in-depth research and contribute to the development of legal linguistic literature in Indonesia.

II. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to identify and analyze pressure words in interrogations from a forensic linguistics perspective. The research focuses on analyzing the meaning of utterances and the power relations constructed through language, rather than on statistical data. The data used are secondary in nature, obtained through documentation and literature review, including interrogation transcripts, excerpts from investigative interviews, and speech examples from academic literature. The data were selected based on indications of verbal pressure or linguistic manipulation. The analysis was carried out using two approaches: speech act analysis, referring to the theories of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), to identify utterances such as commands, threats, and persuasion; and critical discourse analysis, as outlined by Fairclough (1995), to examine how utterances reflect power relations in interrogations. Gibbons (2003) supports the view that language control reflects power imbalances in legal contexts. Additionally, Leo (2008) emphasizes that language used in modern interrogations tends to be more manipulative than physically coercive. Kassin et al. (2010) add that verbal pressure may lead to false confessions, particularly among vulnerable subjects. Olsson (2008), Shuy (1993), and Stubbs (1996) highlight the importance of linguistic analysis in uncovering hidden intentions and understanding the legal impact of speech. This research is exploratory in nature and limited to linguistic analysis without involving direct subjects. The findings are expected to serve as a foundation for further empirical studies.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The use of language in the context of interrogation is not merely a matter of technical

communication but constitutes a social practice involving elements of power, pressure, and persuasion. Within the interrogation room, the interrogator—representing the state—holds a significantly higher position in the power hierarchy compared to the subject under examination. Through language, the interrogator can construct reality, shape opinions, and even influence the subject's decision to give specific answers. One manifestation of this linguistic power is the use of coercive language verbal strategies that explicitly or implicitly exert psychological pressure on the subject.

This study stems from the awareness that the use of coercive language in interrogations has not been extensively discussed in the literature on forensic linguistics in Indonesia. Yet, this practice holds considerable potential to undermine the integrity of legal proceedings, especially when employed manipulatively or beyond ethical boundaries. Therefore, this section presents the findings on various forms of coercive language identified from secondary data, including transcripts, interview excerpts, and academic references. The analysis is based on Speech Act Theory (Austin & Searle) and the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework (Fairclough), aiming to reveal the pragmatic functions of the utterances as well as the power relations embedded within them.

Identification Results: Forms of Coercive Language

From the data analysis, several forms of coercive language were identified and categorized into five main types, each with distinct pragmatic functions and psychological impacts on the interrogation subject:

1. Implied Threat

Example: “If you confess now, the punishment could be lighter.”

This utterance may appear as advice or even a beneficial offer, but in fact, it contains a hidden threat. It implies that failure to confess immediately will result in a more severe legal consequence. The interrogator uses this tactic to create emotional pressure, prompting the desired response without overt intimidation. Pragmatically, this utterance carries an illocutionary force with a directive intent—aiming to steer the subject's action (in this case, to confess). The coercion is embedded through a manipulated choice: “confess and get

leniency” or “stay silent and face harsh punishment.” It is a potent form of pressure that disguises domination under the pretense of rationality or empathy, while structurally subordinating the subject.

2. Coercive Affirmative Statement

Example: “We already know you did it, it's just a matter of whether you admit it or not.”

This kind of utterance is a common linguistic framing strategy in interrogation. The interrogator actively constructs a narrative suggesting that the truth is already known, leaving admission as the subject's only viable option. However, such a claim is not necessarily backed by legal evidence. By framing reality this way, the interrogator creates the perception that resistance is futile. Linguistically, this is a form of presupposition, where certain information is assumed to be true and no longer questioned. The effect is to restrict the subject's space for negotiation or defense. Psychologically, the subject may feel heavy pressure, caught in an unfair binary logic: confess or be seen as denying the “truth” already “known.”

3. Loaded or Presuppositional Questions

Example: “Why did you do it?”

This question presupposes that the subject has committed an act, even though it may not have been legally proven. It is considered a loaded question because it carries a hidden assumption presented as established truth. In interrogations, this type of question is dangerous as it channels the subject's response within the interrogator's predefined frame. According to Speech Act Theory, this question is not only informative but also directive and even constative, as it constructs a particular reality. Psychologically, a subject unaware of this semantic trap may be caught in a narrative that disadvantages them, potentially leading to an unintended confession.

4. Strategic Repetition

Example: Repeating the same question or intimidating statement over and over.

This strategy exerts cumulative pressure. By repeating the same question persistently—especially over extended periods or when the subject is physically and mentally exhausted—the interrogator induces cognitive fatigue that affects the subject's emotional stability. In many cases, subjects may feel frustrated,

confused, and eventually comply with the interrogator's expectations just to end the pressure. This technique is referred to by many researchers as a form of subtle psychological coercion. Though it involves no physical violence, its effect can be equally destructive by weakening mental resilience. In the absence of legal counsel, strategic repetition can become a dominant coercive tool, isolating the subject in a cycle of confusion and internal pressure.

5. Emotional Appeals

Example: "Think of your family at home."

Emotional appeals employ affective approaches to elicit responses from the subject. This strategy targets the human side of the interrogation subject by invoking feelings of guilt, compassion, or concern for third parties, usually family members. While seemingly sympathetic, such utterances are actually manipulative, using emotion as a means to extract a confession. Pragmatically, this is an expressive speech act functioning as an indirect directive. This strategy is particularly effective if the subject is emotionally vulnerable or deeply attached to those referenced. Although not overtly forceful, the pressure can be immense as it targets the subject's emotional core.

Discussion Based on Linguistic Theories

The identification of five primary forms of coercive language in interrogations demonstrates that language plays a highly complex role in the power dynamics between interrogator and subject. In the interrogation room, utterances are not merely vehicles of information but social actions with psychological and legal consequences. Thus, linguistic analysis of such utterances must consider how language functions both pragmatically and ideologically in asymmetrical situations.

Pragmatically, coercive language use can be explained through the Speech Act Theory, which asserts that speaking is not merely saying something but doing something. In interrogation, this may include acts of coercion, urging, guiding, or subtly persuading. Illocutionary acts dominate the interaction, as each interrogator's utterance is designed to influence the subject's behavior, directly or indirectly. For example, the statement, "If you confess now, the punishment could be lighter," is not merely informative it compels the subject

to make a decision under psychological pressure disguised as choice.

Meanwhile, from a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, the structure of language in interrogation is a meticulously organized representation of power. Language in this context is not a neutral medium, but a tool of social domination designed to maintain control over the subject. Question structure, intonation, repetition, and word choice are all part of a linguistic strategy to frame the subject as guilty or at least place them in a defensive position. In this context, language works to build and sustain power imbalance, with the interrogator as the controller of interaction and the subject symbolically and emotionally oppressed.

This situation is exacerbated when the subject is psychologically unstable, unaware of their legal rights, or lacks legal representation. In such conditions, the power of utterances becomes dominant, as the subject has little leverage to resist, reject, or even recognize manipulation. Mental fatigue from question repetition, emotional pressure from affective appeals, or linguistic traps via presupposition are all forms of verbal coercion that gradually erode the subject's resistance.

Therefore, interpreting utterances in interrogation must account for the power context and the strategic intent of language use. Language is not merely a tool for communication it is also a tool of control, operating subtly yet effectively. This understanding is crucial for exposing how interrogation can become a site prone to abuse of power if not ethically and professionally monitored.

In conclusion, this discussion highlights the importance of critical awareness regarding the role of language in legal practice. Linguistic analysis is not only about deconstructing language structures but also about uncovering power dynamics and their impact on procedural justice. Without a deep understanding of these aspects, interrogation risks becoming an unfair practice that may even violate human rights, especially when language is systematically used as a covert coercive tool.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the use of pressure words in interrogation represents a form of linguistic domination that operates systematically through seemingly neutral

utterances, yet carries strong persuasive and manipulative power. Language is employed not merely as a tool to extract information, but also as a means to control the narrative, influence perception, and suppress the subject's responses through various verbal strategies. Five primary forms of pressure words were identified: covert threats, forced affirmations, leading questions, strategic repetitions, and emotional appeals, each having different psychological effects but all rooted in an unequal power relationship between the interrogator and the subject. Through the lens of speech act theory and critical discourse analysis, it becomes evident that interrogative utterances cannot be separated from the social, legal, and power contexts in which they occur. Thus, this study highlights that interrogation, as a linguistic practice, deserves special attention in forensic linguistics, particularly to prevent language misuse that could lead to human rights violations such as coerced confessions or manipulated testimonies. While this research is preliminary and exploratory in nature, it serves as a significant foundation for further empirical studies and supports the call for ethical, rights-based reforms in interrogation policies.

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