

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Legitimation in English Textbooks' Treatment of Language Standardization

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Abstract—This study investigates the ideological legitimation strategies embedded in English academic discourse on language standardization, with a focus on sociolinguistics textbooks. Grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the research applies Theo van Leeuwen's (2007) model of legitimation, which categorizes legitimation into authorization, moralization, and rationalization. The analysis draws on carefully selected textbook extracts, chosen based on authorial credibility, publication by high-ranking academic presses, educational recognition, and recency. Using qualitative discourse analysis alongside quantitative frequency calculations, the study identifies and interprets the use of twelve subtypes of legitimation. Findings show a dominance of impersonal authorization and means-oriented rationalization (each 15%), reflecting a tendency to justify language ideologies through institutional norms and technical procedures. Expert authority and moral evaluation (12.5% each) are also prevalent, reinforcing scholarly ethos and ethical judgments. The discourse exhibits a blend of descriptive neutrality and normative positioning, challenging prescriptivist ideologies while simultaneously legitimizing progressive academic values. Ultimately, the study highlights the ideological nature of even those texts that aim for objective analysis, showing that critiques of standard language ideologies are themselves constructed through strategic legitimation. The paper concludes that sociolinguistics textbooks serve not only as educational tools but also as vehicles for ideological negotiation.

Index Terms—standardization, academic discourse, legitimation, ideology

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the illuminating insights of CDA is that a text is a reflection of deep-seated cultural, political, historical, institutional and intellectual forces that lie behind its surface. Academic discourse in humanities, to some extent like other types of discourse: political discourse, religious discourse and social discourse, is subject to the dangers of bias, discrimination, hidden ideological positions, the influences of globalization processes and cultural differences.

In recent years, the investigation into academic discourse has witnessed substantial growth, essentially motivated by various influential factors that have reshaped the academic landscape. At the core of these factors is the globalization of higher education. That is, in recent years there has been a significant increase in the internationalization of university education. As higher education institutions become more and more interconnected on the global stage, both researchers and students find themselves obliged to adapt to diverse academic norms, identities, cultures and expectations. The processes of globalization have led to a state of mixed and heterogeneous ideas, patterns of thought and methodologies. Consequently, the development of globalization has stressed the urgent need for a more inclusive and more culturally aware academic environment (Hyland, 2009).

The term 'academic discourse' refers to the unique ways of thinking and using language that are employed in academic contexts. The study of academic discourse is important due to the central role it plays in teaching students, implementing learning, disseminating ideas and constructing knowledge. At the core of academic activities are the knowledge resources such as textbooks, conference presentations, lectures, essays, dissertations and research articles. Furthermore, academic discourse is not only essential for the tasks of teaching, learning and research, but it also forms the social entities, roles and relationships that define students, academics and the institutions of higher education. Language is the means through which academics and students write, detect problems and present issues in ways that are unique to particular academic communities, thereby shaping realities, identities, institutions, disciplines and knowledge (Hyland, 2009).

There is a growing conviction nowadays that the traditional perspective of academic writing as a totally unbiased and disinterested means of reporting independently existing facts is misleading. Academic writing is now interpreted as a means through which researchers pursue the persuasion of their peers of the validity and rationality of their arguments.

In order for these arguments to be considered effective and plausible, they must be formulated in a way that goes along

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with the expectations and norms of the academic community of which the writer is a member. Accordingly, academic writing could be understood as a negotiation of what is considered to be convincing knowledge within a particular academic community through conventionalized patterns of argumentation. Unless a person masters these patterns, they cannot be counted as a member of the academic community (Hewings, 2001).

In recent years, the investigation into academic discourse has witnessed substantial growth, essentially motivated by various influential factors that have reshaped the academic landscape. At the core of these factors is the globalization of higher education. That is, in recent years there has been a significant increase in the internationalization of university education. As higher education institutions become more and more interconnected on the global stage, both researchers and students find themselves obliged to adapt to diverse academic norms, identities, cultures and expectations. The processes of globalization have led to a state of mixed and heterogeneous ideas, patterns of thought and methodologies. Consequently, the development of globalization has stressed the urgent need for a more inclusive and more culturally aware academic environment (Hyland, 2009).

Language standardization is a very important issue that has many ramifications in education, politics, religion and identity. To add to the importance of the issue, language standardization is intimately linked to several other related issues: *the notion of 'language' itself, language policy and planning, language change, the status of accents and dialects, language and identity and language and globalization*. Discussions about these issues are charged with ideological positions and heated arguments.

While the issue of language standardization, alongside its related issues, received much attention and spurred heated discussions in the past, the situation is no longer so. It seems that the English academic discourse has reached a consensus about these issues. In practice, however, language users, governments and education policies, to some extent at least, oppose this academic consensus. This discrepancy between the academic discourse and the public understanding of the issue of standardization is well-known and well-diagnosed. We have, indeed, two worlds of discourse. In the current sense of the word 'critical', none of these discourses is exempt from critical scrutiny. This study, therefore, is an invitation to re-open the discussion in the light of the insights offered by Critical Discourse Analysis.

Among the different outputs of academic discourse (i.e. theses, dissertations, research articles, book reviews, research proposals), textbooks have been chosen to represent academic discourse as the data of the study. The rationale behind choosing textbooks stems from various reasons. At first, textbooks typically explore the agreed-upon and well-established topics, arguments, judgments and the underlying ideologies of a particular discipline. In other words, textbooks represent the mainstream discourse conventions of the field, since they address the mass audience of students. Other forms of academic discourse, by contrast, are typically concerned with problematizing the common topics and the taken-for-granted issues in a discipline, since they are directed to the narrow academic elite of researchers and scholars that is always busy with discovering new facts or challenging the established ones.

Another reason is that the other types of academic discourse are concerned with a very specific and narrow topic; they rarely explore or discuss general concepts like 'language standardization' or 'language change', and if such topics are mentioned, they are presented in a research-driven and problematizing context; they are not the main focus of such forms of academic work. Textbooks, however, are typically considered as the best place for presenting the foundational concepts of a discipline. The third reason is that textbooks are typically written by well-known and recognized authorities who have gained international academic reputation due to their intensive experience in the field and their work in highly prestigious universities (especially the textbooks published by globally recognized publishers such as Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press). Textbooks are the only academic genre exclusive to seasoned scholars. The academic status of textbook writers is, therefore, rarely suspected. Other forms, however, are written by a wide population of students, researchers and scholars, including PhD candidates and unexperienced researchers.

The fourth reason is a more practical one. That is, textbooks are the most manageable and accessible output of academic work. The language of textbooks is characteristically clear and straightforward. Furthermore, the content of textbooks is typically clearly structured and void of difficult to understand statistics and dense citations that are found in the other forms.

II. LANGUAGE STANDARDIZATION AND IDEOLOGY

The reason discussions about standardization, change, and language policy often spur heated ideological debates lies in the symbolic power of language itself. Language is intimately connected to personal and group identity, historical memory, and notions of legitimacy and authenticity. As a result, debates about linguistic issues are rarely confined to matters of grammar or usage; they are often experienced as debates about social values, historical narratives, and power relations. Furthermore, because language is a ubiquitous and deeply personal aspect of everyday life, individuals and groups may perceive changes or challenges to linguistic norms to be direct threats to their social standing or cultural heritage. This emotional investment amplifies the intensity of ideological debates surrounding language issues (Joseph, 2006).

One factor that intensifies ideological debates around language issues is the role of language in constructing and maintaining group boundaries. Language varieties often function as markers of ethnicity, nationality, or social class, and discussions about which forms are deemed standard or acceptable can therefore carry implications for inclusion and exclusion. When certain linguistic practices are privileged, speakers of non-standard or minority varieties may feel that

their identities and social positions are being devalued. Thus, controversies over language policy, standardization, or change are not solely concerned with communication efficiency but about the symbolic management of social group identities. In this sense, disputes over language are often indirect ways of negotiating broader questions about belonging, citizenship, and cultural legitimacy (Blommaert, 2010).

Another reason for the ideological intensity surrounding language debates is the perception that language policies and standardization efforts are linked to issues of access and social mobility. Standard language varieties are often linked to educational and professional advancement, and mastery of the standard is commonly positioned as a requirement for social success. As a result, decisions about what constitutes standard language practices can affect individuals' opportunities for upward mobility. When access to prestige varieties is unevenly distributed, debates about language norms can become entangled with broader concerns about social justice, equity, and institutional discrimination. Consequently, discussions of language change, planning, and standardization are frequently experienced as highly consequential and politically sensitive (Shohamy, 2006).

Finally, the global spread of certain languages and standards has added a further layer of ideological complexity to debates about language practices. In many contexts, the dominance of global languages such as English has raised concerns about linguistic imperialism, cultural homogenization, and the erosion of local linguistic diversity. As academic, political, and economic life increasingly require proficiency in dominant languages, discussions of language policies and standardization often trigger ideological debates about autonomy, identity, and resistance to cultural domination. Language, in this sense, becomes a locus where broader tensions between globalization and localism are negotiated, making issues of standardization and planning deeply intertwined with global political and cultural dynamics (Phillipson, 2009).

III. LEGITIMATION IN CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Legitimation is central to all forms of discourse. In fact, it can be argued that the main goal of any discourse is to justify or validate something, whether directly or indirectly. Those who produce discourse use various linguistic strategies to portray their beliefs or ideologies as reasonable, ethical, and acceptable (van Leeuwen, 2008).

A. Authorization

Authorization refers to legitimation by reference to authority. It involves invoking persons, institutions, traditions, or customs that are seen as authoritative or possessing the right to define what is right or permissible.

(a). Personal Authority

Personal authority is when legitimation is based on the authority of individuals who hold institutional or social power.

"In personal authority, legitimation is conveyed by reference to the authority of tradition, custom, law and persons in whom institutional authority is vested" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 94).

Example: "The principal said that mobile phones are not allowed in school."

Here, the legitimacy of the claim rests on the power and position of the speaker (the principal).

(b). Expert Authority

This draws on the knowledge or expertise of specialists rather than hierarchical power.

"Authority can also be vested in experts, people who possess special knowledge rather than institutional power" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 94).

Example: "Nutritionists recommend five servings of fruits and vegetables per day."

The legitimation is based on the *expertise* of nutritionists.

(c). Impersonal Authority

Impersonal authority involves referring to laws, regulations, rules, or institutional policies as sources of legitimacy without naming the persons behind them.

"Legitimation may also be provided by reference to impersonal authority, to tradition, custom, law and institutional regulations, rather than to specific individuals" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 95).

Example: "According to company policy, late arrivals are unacceptable."

The source of legitimation is an institutional rule, not a person.

(d). Conformity (Authority of the Majority)

Conformity refers to legitimation by invoking consensus, the behavior of the majority, or social norms.

"Authorization may also be based on conformity, on what everybody does, or on what people in general do or believe" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 97).

Example: "Everyone recycles nowadays."

The action is legitimized by its wide social acceptance.

B. Moralization

Moralization is the process of legitimizing actions or ideas by referencing value systems—what is considered right or wrong in a moral or ethical sense.

(a). *Evaluation*

This involves moral judgment based on shared values, often presented as universally accepted.

“Evaluation expresses moral value in explicit terms (e.g., *it is wrong, it is good*)” (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 98).

Example: “Cheating is dishonest and unfair.”

Here, legitimation is built on explicit moral valuation.

(b). *Abstraction*

Moralization can also be conveyed through abstract moral principles that stand in for specific values.

“Abstraction legitimates social practices by reference to discourses of moral values that are general and abstract” (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 99).

Example: “Freedom must be protected at all costs.”

The abstract value (*freedom*) is invoked to legitimize actions without specifying the context.

(c). *Generalization*

Generalization refers to legitimating an action by presenting it as part of a more general moral rule or truth.

“In generalization, legitimation is grounded in generalized assumptions, often drawn from societal or cultural norms” (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 100).

Example: “Hard work always pays off.”

The statement legitimizes behavior through a widely accepted societal belief.

C. *Rationalization*

Rationalization is legitimation through reference to goals, utility, or consequences. It explains actions based on logic, purpose, or effectiveness.

(a). *Goal-Oriented Rationalization*

This justifies practices by stating their intended outcome or purpose.

“Goal-oriented rationalization is concerned with the purpose of practices” (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 102).

Example: “We increased surveillance to ensure national security.”

Here, the action is legitimized because of its stated goal (security).

(b). *Means-Oriented Rationalization*

This type explains the method used as the most effective or appropriate way to achieve a goal.

“Means-oriented rationalization justifies practices by reference to the methods used” (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 103).

Example: “Standardized testing is the most efficient way to measure student achievement.”

The method (testing) is justified as an effective means.

(c). *Effect-Oriented Rationalization*

Legitimation occurs through reference to actual or potential outcomes or effects.

“Effect-oriented rationalization is concerned with the effects of practices, with the benefits they bring” (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 103).

Example: “This policy will boost economic growth.”

The action is legitimated by its claimed beneficial effect.

TABLE 1
LEGITIMATION TYPES (VAN LEEUWEN 2007)

Category	Subtype	Definition
Authorization	Personal	Refers to power held by individuals or institutions
	Expert	Refers to authority of specialized knowledge
	Impersonal	Refers to rules, laws, or customs without naming the source
Moralization	Conformity	Legitimizes through consensus or common practice
	Evaluation	Makes explicit value judgments
	Abstraction	Uses abstract moral principles
Rationalization	Generalization	Draws on generalized assumptions or societal beliefs
	Goal-oriented	Justifies action based on goals or aims
	Means-oriented	Justifies method as appropriate or necessary
	Effect-oriented	Justifies action by highlighting beneficial consequences

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Data Selection

The textbooks are selected based on the four criteria of the *author's status*, *publisher's ranking*, *textbook's recognition* and *date of publication*, which are detailed below.

(a). Author's Status

To ensure that the author is an influential and outstanding scholar, the Hirsch Index (henceforth h-index) is referred to. All the authors of the textbooks analyzed in the present study have a h-index of at least 10.

(b). Publisher's Ranking

The Scholarly Publishers Indicators (henceforth SPI) provides a good system for ranking publishers. An appealing feature is that this ranking, contrary to other systems, focuses specifically on academic books as the basis of their data. All the textbooks that the present study analyzes are published by top worldwide publishers.

(c). Textbook's Recognition

This criterion concerns the extent to which a textbook is validated and recognized in academic settings. This is best done through checking the textbook placement on the university syllabi in the English-speaking countries. The platform Open Syllabus provides great aid in this regard. This platform gives detailed statistics about the proliferation of textbooks across university level syllabi. The textbooks used as the data of the present study are taken from a ranking of linguistics textbooks that covers 26,470 titles. All the selected textbooks are ranked within the top 1% linguistics textbooks.

(d). Date of Publication

Understanding the current direction of a field requires analyzing the most recent resources of that discipline. However, it is not always easy to find recent resources on certain topics for various reasons. In order to give the criteria of the date of publication a reasonable weight, though, the chosen textbooks should not be published before 2000, regardless of whether they satisfy the remaining three criteria.

TABLE 2
THE SELECTED TEXTBOOKS

Title	Author(s)	Publisher	Year of Publication
An Introduction to Sociolinguistics, 7th Edition	Ronald Wardhaugh Janet M. Fuller	Wiley Blackwell	2015
An Introduction to Sociolinguistics, 4th Edition	Janet Holmes	Routledge	2013
What is Sociolinguistics?	Gerard Van Herk	Wiley Blackwell	2012
Introducing Sociolinguistics, 2nd Edition	Rajend Mesthrie Joan Swann Ana Deumert William L. Leap	Edinburgh University Press	2009
The Guidebook to Sociolinguistics	Allan Bell	Wiley Blackwell	2014

B. Research Design

1. The study selects three extracts from the chosen textbooks. The extracts are deliberately chosen for their relevance to the topic of language standardization.
2. The selected extracts are analyzed according to the legitimation framework of van Leeuwen (2007).
3. The numbers and percentages of the linguistic realizations of legitimation types are calculated, interpreted, and discussed.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

TABLE 3
RESULTS OF ANALYZING LEGITIMATION TYPES

Type of Legitimation	Occurrences	Percentage (%)
Authorization: Impersonal	6	15.0
Rationalization: Means-oriented	6	15.0
Authorization: Expert	5	12.5
Moralization: Evaluation	5	12.5
Moralization: Abstraction	4	10.0
Rationalization: Goal-oriented	4	10.0
Authorization: Conformity	3	7.5
Moralization: Generalization	3	7.5
Rationalization: Effect-oriented	3	7.5
Authorization: Personal	1	2.5

A. Dominance of Impersonal Authorization and Means-Oriented Rationalization (Each 15%)

Impersonal authorization occurs when rules, laws, or institutional discourses are invoked without attaching them to a specific person or expert. Its dominance reflects how sociolinguistic textbooks tend to appeal to institutional norms and established disciplinary practices. This aligns with the genre conventions of academic writing, which often draws legitimacy from broader, seemingly objective systems rather than individuals.

Means-oriented rationalization explains actions or policies in terms of the means through which they are achieved. Its high frequency suggests that textbooks often seek to justify standardization processes or linguistic ideologies through the tools and practices used — such as grammar books, dictionaries, or educational systems — thus presenting them as natural or efficient rather than ideological.

These two together indicate a legitimating strategy that blends *institutional authority* with *technical or procedural justification*. This may obscure the ideological nature of standard language norms by framing them as outcomes of bureaucratic or academic rationality.

B. Strong Presence of Expert Authorization and Moral Evaluation (Each 12.5%)

Expert authorization occurs through citing named authorities such as scholars (e.g., Haugen, Chomsky, or Lippi-Green). The regular invocation of scholars and established theories reflects the epistemic authority that underpins textbook discourse. It legitimizes arguments by grounding them in academic tradition and established research rather than subjective opinion.

Moral evaluation, in contrast, includes value-laden descriptions of language use and attitudes (e.g., “good”, “insulting”, “tolerant”, “intolerant”). Its prominence shows that textbooks do not remain ideologically neutral; they often encode moral judgments, especially when critiquing prescriptivism, language discrimination, or standard language ideology.

Together, these forms point to a discursive strategy that combines *scholarly authority* with *ethical positioning*. This allows sociolinguistic texts to critique dominant ideologies while simultaneously legitimizing their alternative viewpoints.

C. Notable Use of Abstraction and Goal-Oriented Rationalization (Each 10%)

Moral abstraction involves invoking generalized values or principles (e.g., equality, logic, tradition). This strategy abstracts from specific examples to justify linguistic choices or to critique norms. It functions ideologically by universalizing particular viewpoints under the guise of common sense or general good.

Goal-oriented rationalization refers to justifying actions based on intended outcomes. For example, standardization is legitimated as necessary for literacy or administrative efficiency. This underscores the instrumental rationality often employed to defend language planning, reinforcing its perceived utility over its ideological roots.

D. Moderate Use of Conformity, Generalization, and Effect-Oriented Rationalization (Each 7.5%)

Authorization by conformity appeals to what most people do or believe. This is common in textbooks when referencing societal attitudes or widespread beliefs about correctness and language. It naturalizes dominant ideologies by portraying them as majority views.

Moral generalization appeals to universal norms, such as the belief that all languages are equal. This is typically used to support linguistic equality or anti-prescriptivist stances. While progressive, it still functions as a legitimation device by universalizing sociolinguistic values.

Effect-oriented rationalization justifies practices based on their outcomes (e.g., social discrimination, educational success). This strategy reveals an awareness of the sociopolitical consequences of language ideologies, reinforcing the relevance of sociolinguistic inquiry.

E. Minimal Use of Personal Authorization (2.5%)

Only one instance of **personal authorization** was observed. This reflects the academic and depersonalized nature of textbook discourse, where personal opinions or anecdotal authority are discouraged in favor of collective, expert, or institutional legitimacy.

VI. CONCLUSION

The distribution of legitimation types reveals several important ideological trends:

- **Academic neutrality as an illusion:** Despite their descriptive aims, the textbooks actively promote moral values (e.g., linguistic equality), epistemic authority (through expert citations), and institutional legitimacy (through impersonal references).
- **Standard language ideology as a discursive target:** Many strategies are used not to uphold but to *deconstruct* dominant ideologies. For example, expert authorization and moral abstraction are often employed to challenge prescriptivist norms.
- **Blend of descriptive and normative:** While sociolinguistics claims to describe language use objectively, these results show a complex interweaving of *descriptive explanations* with *normative judgments*. This hybrid nature is a key feature of sociolinguistic discourse.

- **Ideological reflexivity:** The frequent critique of standard language ideology and prescriptivism reflects an attempt at ideological reflexivity. However, the use of legitimation strategies suggests that even critiques are themselves framed ideologically.

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