

# Footing in Courtroom Discourse: A Forensic Linguistic Analysis of Opening Statements in George Floyd's Murder Trial

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**Abstract**—Drawing on Erving Goffman's (1979, 1981) interaction model of footing, which distinguishes between the different speaker's roles of animator, author, and principal, this study explores how shifts in speaker alignment serve as linguistic and ideological strategies that frame competing communicative acts in courtroom discourse. This paper provides a forensic linguistic analysis of opening statements presented in George Floyd's murder trial (2021). The study's main objectives are to demonstrate how courtroom discourse is not only a site of legal argumentation but also of ideological performance, to identify the various speakers' roles in the opening statements of Floyd's murder trial, and to show how these participation roles are manifested linguistically in discourse. The study uses a qualitative forensic discourse analysis approach to discuss how the different speakers' roles are linguistically represented in the opening statements of the trial at hand. Findings reveal that the lawyers adopt particular participation roles during their opening statements, including the roles of animator, author, and principal. These participation roles are linguistically realized by various strategies, including the use of speech acts, modality, agency, emotive language, nominalization, attitude markers, lexical choices, active and passive voice, and evaluative language. Theoretically, the study contributes to forensic linguistics by demonstrating the analytical efficacy of Goffman's participation framework in uncovering the pragmatic and ideological dimensions of courtroom discourse.

**Index Terms**—courtroom discourse, footing, George Floyd, opening statements, speaker's roles

## I. INTRODUCTION

Courtrooms have always been sites for rhetorical power negotiation practiced by specific linguistic strategies (Henderson et al., 2016). Courtroom discourse is perceived as the most linguistically complex communicative setting, where language functions not only as a carrier of information but also as a performance of power, persuasion, and identity formation (Holt & O'Driscoll, 2021; Tvrđiková, 2025). Every word is strategically significant in legal settings, as lawyers tread cautiously with their linguistic choices to build discourses, influence jurors' perceptions, and align themselves with institutional or moral authority. Opening statements particularly prepare the ground for such communicative relations, determining the trial's linguistic, ideological, and affective tone by presenting the central topic, positioning the participants, and framing the defendant's actions within a broader linguistic, moral, and juridical framework (Cotterill, 2003; Heffer, 2005). Opening statements present numerous linguistic strategies and participation roles. To identify these roles, we should recognize the various ways lawyers use footing, speakers' alignment to their words and social role, to communicate their meanings. Revealing such participation roles of footing is relevant to understand the hidden meanings in courtroom discourse. Arguing from this context, this study offers a forensic linguistic analysis of the opening statements in George Floyd's murder trial (2021). Consequently, a forensic linguistic analysis of courtroom discourse is theoretically and analytically pertinent to revealing how language serves as a persuasion and manipulation tool that reconciles legal argumentation with linguistic performance.

The murder trial of George Floyd provides a captivating case study for the investigation of footing in legal discourse. This trial is concerned with the arrest of Floyd, an unarmed African American man. Global demonstrations against racial injustice and police brutality were triggered by video footage that showed Chauvin, a white police officer, kneeling on Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes. The trial turned into a historic legal event that represented the larger fight against systematic racism and responsibility in American law enforcement. In addition to legal issues, its proceedings, especially the opening statements, reflected ingrained ideological and linguistic language that influences public opinion. With its globally publicized trial due to its racial and institutional implications, language was brought to center stage as an excellent vehicle for the negotiation of responsibility and justice. Both defense and prosecution opening statements were not only procedural but also ideological, each presenting contrary moral visions: one invoking justice, accountability, and system reform, and the other invoking legal restraint, reasonable doubt, and the complexity of policing. These opening statements thus yield fertile ground for investigating how footing can be strategically negotiated to construct plausibly linguistic arguments that appeal to jurors and the broader public (Tracy & Robles, 2013).

This study draws on Goffman's (1981) footing model, which refers to the speaker's roles or stance towards his/her utterance and towards others in an interaction, including the alternation between these roles, such as animator (the one who actually utters), author (the one who combines words), and principal (the one whose belief or stance is being expressed). In courtrooms' contexts, such role-switching becomes a critical linguistic and rhetorical tactic: lawyers may address as institutional authority figures bringing institutions to life, as strategic framing writers composing frames, or as principals articulating moral beliefs (Goffman, 1981; Holt & Johnson, 2010). In analyzing these conversions, one sees how speakers manage across multiple identities, i.e., legal, moral, and social, accounting for alignment with or disaffiliation from the ideologies framing their linguistic arguments (Holt & O'Driscoll, 2021).

From a forensic linguistics perspective, an investigation into footing in courtroom discourse offers an important understanding of how legal professionals construct authority and manage accountability through language. Previous studies have shown that courtroom discourse is marked by strategic voice control and stance to present impartiality, assert institutional authority, or enact humanization of actors (Olsson & Luchjenbroers, 2014; Coulthard & Johnson, 2017). Footing management can thus serve as an ideological strategy, allowing speakers to foreground certain perspectives and demonstrate how the various legal aspects within courtrooms are linguistically constructed. The shifting dynamic between the prosecution's fixed moral footing and the defense's dynamic readjustments during the George Floyd trial demonstrates the broader linguistic struggle for moral authority and institutional legitimacy in legal language.

The current study raises two research questions: first, what are the various speakers' roles in the opening statements of Floyd's murder trial? Second, how are these participation roles manifested linguistically in the opening statements of the selected trial? The answer to these research questions encompasses the main objectives of this study: to identify the various speakers' roles in the opening statements of Floyd's murder trial, and to demonstrate how these participation roles are manifested linguistically in the discourse of the trial's opening statements. This study, therefore, attempts to explore how Goffman's (1981) footing model can be analytically extended to courtroom discourse analysis, particularly to the opening statements in George Floyd's murder trial. By using linguistic strategies, such as the use of speech acts, modality, agency, emotive language, nominalization, attitude markers, lexical choices, active and passive voice, and evaluative language, this study reveals how lawyers establish, shift, and negotiate animators', authors', and principals' roles. As such, it seeks to expose the ideological and pragmatic underpinnings of such footing shifts, which, in turn, are anticipated to contribute to both forensic linguistics and discourse studies by demonstrating how Goffman's footing model can offer useful insights into the way language reinforces, resists, and enacts institutional ideologies in courtrooms.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Forensic Linguistics

Forensic linguistics is the scientific study of language within legal contexts, focusing on how linguistic evidence can inform issues of authorship, meaning, credibility, and power in legal settings. This field of linguistics bridges linguistics, law, and criminology, applying linguistic theories and analytical tools to texts such as police interviews, courtroom exchanges, confessions, and legal documents (e.g., Wortham, 1996; Olsson & Luchjenbroers, 2014; Coulthard & Johnson, 2017; Wright & Picornell, 2024). Its scope extends from micro-level linguistic analysis, such as syntax, semantics, and pragmatics (Khafaga, 2022a), to broader discourse and sociolinguistic examinations of how power, identity, and ideology are enacted through language. Forensic linguists examine not only *what* is said but also *how* it is said, emphasizing the relationship between linguistic form and communicative intention. In courtroom discourse, this involves studying strategies like questioning patterns, turn-taking, narrative construction, and stance management to reveal how participants use language to assert authority, establish credibility, or manipulate interpretation (Heffer, 2005). According to Wortham (1996), forensic linguistics offers rigorous methodologies ranging from phonetic analysis and stylometry to discourse analysis. Its potential is confirmed by its historic achievements, and its future is shaped by continuous developments in digital profiling and ethical transparency. Scholars in this field (e.g., Coulthard, 1994; Shuy, 2006; Prihantoro & Gillings, 2025) argue that linguistic analysis provides critical insight into how justice is linguistically constructed, often uncovering implicit bias, coercion, or misrepresentation embedded in speech acts and institutional texts. By combining empirical linguistic methodologies with interpretive discourse analysis, forensic linguistics contributes to both legal outcomes and theoretical understandings of communication in institutional power settings.

### B. Courtroom Discourse

According to Cotterill (2003), courtroom discourse describes the unique written and spoken language patterns that are employed in courtrooms. These include the statements made by judges, the questions posed by attorneys, the testimony of witnesses, and even nonverbal cues like gestures and body language. Courtroom discourse is quite institutionalized; it is formal, goal-driven, and frequently conflict-oriented with strict turn-taking guidelines and predetermined sequences like the question-and-answers sessions governed by legal roles. Courtroom discourse, thus, is featured by particular linguistic features that may be missed in ordinary genres of discourse. Turn-taking in courtroom

discussions is clearly defined and controlled by institutional roles. Since only some actors, such as judges and attorneys, have the authority to start turns, the court is an extreme version of institutional discourse. Adjacency pairings, such as question-answer, commanding response, and objection-ruling sequences, are frequently used to structure the discussion in courtroom discourse (Tannen, 2007; Zaiton, 2025). Courtroom discourse is a reflection of hierarchical duties characterized by numerous linguistic strategies. These linguistic tactics are highly represented in opening statements (Auer, 1998).

### C. *Opening Statements*

Opening statements are procedural pillars of courtroom discourse, a jury's first systematic exposure to a case's competing arguments. Functionally, opening statements outline what each side intends to have the evidence establish; rhetorically, they perform complex tasks of persuasion and framing that affect jurors' understandings well in advance of formal evidence (Tiersma, 1999; Conley & O'Barr, 2005). From an analytical discourse perspective, opening statements situate the trial within a particular story schema, constructing characters, causality, and morality with linguistic and rhetorical choices consistent with each side's ideology. Prosecutors always use the opening statements to construct a narrative of guilt, centering upon evidence as the inevitable confirmation of a preconceived discourse. This involves the strategic use of language, fact sequencing, modality, and evaluative language expressing certainty and legitimacy (Luchjenbroers, 1993). Defense counsels, on the other hand, use their opening statements to communicate doubt and undermine the prosecution's account. The contrast between the two strategies reflects what Cotterill (2003) describes as 'the battle of narratives,' a struggle not only over facts but also over interpretive authority.

From a pragmatic perspective, opening statements employ a range of discourse strategies. First, they employ framing, the tactic of selecting and concentrating on some feature of reality in order to promote a particular interpretation (Goffman, 1974). Second, opening statements use footing shifts, whereby speakers place themselves between reporting, narrating, and aligning with jurors, thereby establishing rapport and credibility (Goffman, 1981; Archer, 2005). Third, they use narrative coherence and fidelity, which means that they enhance juror persuasion by establishing a story that appears to be consistent and morally compelling (Fisher, 1987). Linguistically, opening statements are likely to employ pronoun manipulation (e.g., 'we,' 'I,' 'you'), evaluation adjectives (e.g., 'tragic,' 'cold-blooded'), temporal staging for the purpose of achieving emotional congruity and moral judgment, and the frequent use of predictive modals (e.g., 'you will hear,' 'the evidence will show') to support the speaker's epistemic authority (Heffer, 2005). Further, these statements are performative acts: they don't just report the expected evidence, but they begin to constitute the moral and narrative world of the trial (Austin, 1962). Empirical evidence in forensic linguistics shows that preliminary impressions of the jury, established through opening statements, have a strong influence on verdicts (Diamond & Casper, 1992), which emphasizes the performative and cognitive power of the opening statement as an initial site of persuasion.

### D. *Ervin Goffman's (1981) Interaction Model of Footing*

Goffman's (1981) interaction model of footing is an analytic framework to analyze the way speakers position themselves in interaction through shifts in alignment, role, and stance. In this conceptual model, footing refers to the relational and communicative frame of reference of the participant with respect to both the utterance and interlocutors, with changes in how speakers frame authority, distance, or involvement. Goffman's (1979) three fundamental roles in any spoken discourse are the 'animator' (the person who controls the mechanical production of the utterance), the 'author' (who chooses or devises the language), and the 'principal' (whose stand, belief, or liability it exemplifies). These roles either converge or diverge according to context, which allows speakers to strategically vary voice and identity to achieve rhetorical tasks. In the context of courtroom discourse, such shifts have especially high stakes since lawyers need to constantly contend with the interaction between personal beliefs, institutional mandates, and rhetorical presentation (Goffman, 1974; Holt & Johnson, 2010). With footing analysis in mind, researchers can discern how legal participants negotiate multiple facets of stance, such as moral, professional, and ideological, and so shed light on the complex mechanics by which linguistic performance affects perceptions of authority, credibility, and justice (Clayman, 1992).

According to Cowper (2003), Goffman transcends the duality of speaker and hearer. He argues that footing demonstrates how language is used to establish and reshape various stances and maintains that frames, the larger interpretive framework for events, are closely related to footing. Similar to a musical key shift in discussion, a change in footing frequently indicates a change in frame. Footing shows how people constantly shift their location inside the macro-contexts that comprise frames (Clayman, 1992). Čekaitė and Ann-Carita (2019) further argue that footing continues to have a significant impact in several fields, including conversational analysis to track participants' footing alterations moment by moment and classroom discourse by highlighting how stance-taking facilitates the negotiation of voice, authority, and many viewpoints in classroom interactions. Significantly, for Sandrelli (2017), a useful perspective for examining conversational turns in general and courtroom discourse in particular is Goffman's (1981) footing model, which is further heightened by Wright et al.'s (2022) argument that footing shows how casual discussions are performative, complicated, and negotiated.

Furthermore, Goffman's (1981) model of footing intersects with contemporary approaches to stance and identity in discourse studies, extending its analytical relevance to modern forensic contexts. Previous research (e.g., Du Bois, 2007; Tracy & Robles, 2013; O'Driscoll, 2018; Khafaga, 2022b) emphasizes that stance-taking and footing are intertwined in

constructing social meaning, as speakers continuously index evaluation, positioning, and alignment through their linguistic choices. Within the context of this study, footing is thus not treated as a static categorization but as a dynamic process through which trial participants construct and negotiate professional, moral, and ideological identities through linguistic performance. Consequently, by integrating Goffman's model with recent developments in discourse pragmatics, this framework enables a comprehensive understanding of how the prosecution and defense, in Floyd's trial, employ footing to manage their institutional voices, perform persuasion, and implicitly position themselves within the broader socio-political discourse surrounding race, justice, and accountability.

### *E. Previous and Related Studies*

Much previous research has employed Goffman's (1981) interaction model of footing in numerous communicative contexts, including education, media, political communication, and everyday talk, demonstrating its effectiveness as an interactional role and identity construction analysis model. In classrooms, previous studies have shown how teachers change footing to manage authority and rapport, switching between institutional and interactional roles to enact classroom control and participation (Lee, 2011; Nguyen, 2012). In media communication, especially radio and television interviews and news broadcasts, footing has been used to understand how journalists navigate neutrality, credibility, and audience identification (Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Ekström, 2006; Choe, 2020). Political communication research has also invoked footing to illuminate how politicians build personas and manage ideological framing; moving between the voices of institutional functionaries, empathetic publics, and moral authorities, they create persuasive texts that appeal to competing audiences (Bull & Feldman, 2011; Fetzer & Bull, 2012). In everyday-occurring communication, footing works to negotiate relationships and identity performance, with speakers shifting between humor, seriousness, and authority to identify with or disaffiliate with interlocutors (Tracy & Robles, 2013). Significantly, these studies highlight footing's function as a ubiquitous linguistic approach to orchestrate social roles, interactional positioning, and ideological framing in multiple communicative contexts.

Within the context of courtroom discourse, footing analysis has received growing attention in forensic linguistics, as legal communication demands constant negotiation of authority, detachment, and moral responsibility. Heffer (2005), for example, argues that lawyers and judges employ footing shifts to maintain institutional control while guiding jury interpretation, balancing objectivity with persuasion. Holt and Johnson (2010) further investigate courtroom interactions, identifying how lawyers alternate between animator, author, and principal roles to recontextualize speech, assign blame, or distance themselves from potentially biased statements. Similarly, Cotterill (2003) examines the Simpson trial to show how attorneys manipulate footing to frame moral narratives and influence juror perceptions of credibility and guilt. More recent studies (e.g., Gibbons, 2014; Coulthard & Johnson, 2017; D'hondt, 2019; Chen, 2020; Mısırlı & Akın, 2024) have discussed the concept of footing in courtrooms by integrating it with stance and evaluation theory, emphasizing how footing shifts signal ideological alignment and pragmatic meanings with institutional values. These studies affirm that footing in courtroom discourse is not only a structural phenomenon but also a pragmatic resource for managing institutional voice, projecting legal authority, and shaping ideological meaning. The present study builds on this by applying footing analysis to the Floyd murder trial, highlighting how prosecutorial and defensive rhetoric deploy alignment shifts to perform moral, legal, and ideological roles before the court and the public.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### *A. Data Collection, Description, and Rationale*

The data used in the current study was taken from George Floyd's murder trial (2021). The opening statements pertaining to the trial under investigation can be downloaded from the Famous Trials website (see Appendix). The data consisted of two opening statements delivered by the two lawyers in George Floyd's murder trial. The study is grounded in a qualitative forensic discourse analysis approach to discuss how the different speakers' roles are linguistically represented in the opening statements of the trial at hand. The selected data was classified into two major corpora: (1) the opening statement by the prosecution presented by attorney Jerry Blackwell and (2) the opening statement by the defense represented by attorney Eric Nelson. Each corpus received qualitative discourse analysis using Goffman's (1981) footing framework that focused on indicators signaling transitions between the roles of animator, author, and principal. Such a qualitative forensic linguistic analysis approach enabled an extensive interpretation of the way footing operates effectively as a linguistic and ideological strategy within courtroom discourse.

The rationale for selecting the opening statements of George Floyd's trial is based on the exceptional discursive and linguistic value. Opening statements are the beginning site of discourse construction during a trial where lawyers do not introduce evidence but set the moral and factual frame before the jurors (Heffer, 2005; Coulthard & Johnson, 2017). In the high-profile case at hand, the statements embody competing versions of justice, accountability, and institutional legitimacy and are thus perfectly suited to examine how footing mediates between linguistic performance and legal arguments. The selection of this data set also matches the study's forensic linguistic objective, i.e., to reveal how language is not only a legal implement but also a site of linguistic performance struggle.

### *B. Procedures*

The analysis followed a four-stage qualitative procedure grounded in Goffman's (1981) footing model and forensic linguistics analysis principles. The first stage constitutes the preparation of the selected data, in which the official transcripts of the two opening statements were collected, verified, and classified into linguistic units pertinent to footing and participation roles. The second analytical stage comprises the coding and identification of the linguistic indicators of footing, such as pronoun shifts, speech acts, modality, lexical choices, and reported speech, which were coded using a discourse-analytic approach to detect transitions between animator, author, and principal roles (Holt & Johnson, 2010). The third stage encompasses the interpretation and categorization of the identified linguistic manifestations of footing to determine how footing shifts were employed to construct authority, moral alignment, and ideological stance (Clayman, 2013). Finally, the fourth stage is dedicated to highlighting and discussing the findings obtained from the analysis of the selected data. The four analytical stages are complementary, as they illustrate how footing functions as a persuasive and ideological strategy in courtroom communication, revealing how the micro linguistic analysis effectively contributes to the macro level of interpretation pertaining to the two opening statements under investigation.

#### IV. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

##### A. Footing Through the Role of an Animator in Floyd's Trial Opening Statements

In the two opening statements of Floyd's murder trial, the role of an animator is practiced by the two discourse participants, attorney Jerry Blackwell representing the prosecution and attorney Eric Nelson representing the defense.

###### (a). *The Prosecution as an Animator*

In his opening statement, the prosecution attorney, Blackwell, exercises the role of an animator that is linguistically realized by many strategies, including speech acts, repetition, direct speech, agency, emotive language, and modality.

Excerpts (1)

1(a) Please, I can't breathe, please, man, please... I can't breathe, please. I can't breathe.

1(b) Tell my kids I love them.

1(c) My stomach hurts. My neck hurts. Everything hurts.

In 1(a), the prosecutor is directly quoting George Floyd, bringing his words to life by reporting them. The use of "please" and the repetition of "I can't breathe" is a way of taking an empathic role, invoking the jury's emotional reaction. Goffman's model of footing shows that the animator is reporting what another person said, invoking immediacy and verisimilitude, and thereby making Floyd the active "speaker" and the prosecutor an animator. The use of the first-person pronoun "I" powerfully identifies Floyd as the speaker and puts the speech in the context of an experiential report of his physical sensation. Repetition is employed here as a linguistic strategy to intensify urgency and agony, a hallmark of passionate speech. These repetitions emphasize the animator role, highlight Floyd's pain and vulnerability, and make the experience directly accessible to the listener.

In 1(b), George Floyd is clearly the animator, as he is the original source of the words. The prosecutor reports this statement verbatim to the jury, thereby assuming the animator role, transmitting Floyd's voice while preserving its affective and interpersonal content. The first-person possessive in "my kids" establishes Floyd as the speaker and locates the speech in his personal domain, emphasizing the relational and familial stakes involved. Also, the use of the imperative mode "tell my kids" signals directive perseverance, and the lexical item "love" carries strong emotive content, making the plea morally and affectively charged.

Similarly, in 1(c), the brief, fragmented sentences resonate with Floyd's physical pain. The prosecutor's animation emphasizes suffering. The footing marks a shift from the narrator prosecutor to a direct speaker of Floyd, making it experiential for the jury. Floyd is the animator, in the sense that he is the immediate source of the words being expressed by the prosecution to the jury. The first-person possessive pronoun "my" designates Floyd as the origin of the experience being reported. In uttering his words, the prosecutor allows the jury to directly feel Floyd's bodily sensations and pain. The repetition of "hurts" is emphatic that connotes severe and escalating physical pain, and the movement from particular in "my stomach hurts. My neck hurts" to general in "everything hurts" are linguistically constructing a sense of generalized suffering.

###### (b). *The Defense as an Animator*

The defense attorney, Eric Nelson, also exercises the role of an animator in his opening statement. Here, the footing practiced through the speaker's role of an animator is linguistically communicated by various strategies, including the use of reported speech, active voice, speech acts, repetitions, and lexicalization.

Excerpts (2)

2(a) You will see Officer Lane draw his service weapon after Mr. Floyd failed several times to respond to his commands to show him his hands.

2(b) Mr. Martin asked Mr. Floyd to come in and either buy the cigarettes, exchange, or return the cigarettes. And that second time again, Mr. Floyd refused.

2(c) Officer King and Lane escorted Mr. Floyd to the third location; Minneapolis Squad 320.

In 2(a), the defense animates the action of Officer Lane, reporting in the officer's voice. Footing shifts from Nelson as speaker to a channel for officers' action, creating factual immediacy. The defense places Officer Lane on the surface as an actor performing actions, treating Mr. Floyd as the recipient of actions. The focus is on external action and not internal states or moral judgment, and hence the officer is the speaker-animator of procedural action. The expression "you will see" employs future-oriented deictic phrasing, creating immediacy and guiding jury attention to forthcoming evidence. Also, the use of the action verbs, such as "draw," "failed," "respond," and "show," describes procedural steps clearly and maintains objectivity. The temporal sequence in "after Mr. Floyd failed several times" further emphasizes causality and order of actions.

In a similar vein, in 2(b), the focus is put on what is done by Mr. Martin as speaker-animator, making requests to Floyd, and on Floyd's responses. Linguistically, the text is a dialogic exchange in a neutral, procedural register, where observable communicative acts are prioritized over moral judgment. The action verbs "asked" and "refused" render it extremely explicit to know who says what and to whom, which, in turn, communicates animator responsibility. Additionally, the use of the coordinated options in "buy the cigarettes, exchange, or return the cigarettes" is specific and shows clarity of instruction, and the temporal sequencing "that second time again" emphasizes repetition and persistence for assessing compliance. Notably, the animator role backgrounds Floyd's refusals linguistically and foregrounds Martin's requests. The whole utterances in 2(b) direct the jury to observable behavior and discursively build interaction to legitimize the officers' subsequent behavior, in accordance with the defense's case on reasonableness and obedience.

The same holds for 2(c), with the defense establishing Officers King and Lane as the direct agents (animators) who are taking physical action and Floyd as the recipient. The defense is highlighting action over interpretation, placing the movement in a procedural and neutral frame, and calling attention to the officers' actions without fault being assigned. The specific use of the action verb "escorted" creates controlled, legal movement, inferring treatment, not compulsion. In addition, the declarative speech act contained in the entire structure of 2(c) maintains an objective tone. Thus, the animator's role foregrounds the actions of the officers, using future-tense language, active voice, and declarative style to obtain a unbiased and objective tone that directs jurors towards legal process and aids the defense's portrayal of police conduct as being orderly and in accordance with procedure. Table 1 summarizes the footing through the animator role within the opening statements in Floyd's murder trial.

TABLE 1  
FOOTING THROUGH THE ROLE OF AN ANIMATOR IN FLOYD'S TRIAL

Speaker	Footing role	Linguistic strategy	Pragmatic function
Prosecution	Animator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Speech acts (directives, declaratives)</li> <li>- Repetition</li> <li>- Lexical choices</li> <li>- Direct speech</li> <li>- Emotive language</li> <li>- Agency (first-person pronoun)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conveying distress</li> <li>- Evoking empathy</li> <li>- Humanizing victims</li> <li>- Highlighting suffering</li> </ul>
Defense	Animator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Speech acts (declaratives)</li> <li>- Future-oriented phrasing</li> <li>- Direct description</li> <li>- Active voice</li> <li>- Reported speech</li> <li>- Temporal markers</li> <li>- Action verbs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Showing compliance or failure to comply</li> <li>- Emphasizing police actions</li> <li>- Maintaining neutrality</li> </ul>

*B. Footing Through the Role of an Author in Floyd's Trial Opening Statements*

Another speaker's role that is adopted by the two attorneys is the role of an author, through which they use footing to persuade the court of their own goals.

*(a). The Prosecution as an Author*

The prosecution attorney assumes the author role, presenting a constructed discourse that demonstrates a dexterous narrative authority and presents the victim's suffering before the court. Such an author role is linguistically realized by various strategies, including declarative speech acts, modality, emotive language, lexical choices, temporal markers, and repetition.

Excerpts (3)

3(a) You will learn that on May 25th of 2020, Mr. Derek Chauvin betrayed this badge when he used excessive and unreasonable force upon the body of Mr. George Floyd, that he put his knees upon his neck and his back grinding and crushing him until the very breath, no ladies and gentlemen, until the very life was squeezed out of him.

3(b) You will learn what happened in that nine minutes and 29 seconds when Mr. Derek Chauvin was applying this excessive force to the body of Mr. George Floyd.

3(c) We have two objectives in this trial... the first objective is to give Mr. Chauvin a fair trial. Mr. Chauvin has the presumption of innocence. He is presumed to be innocent until proven guilty.

In 3(a), the author is the prosecutor, Blackwell, who dictates the meaning of words to the jury. Linguistically, by employing the words "you will learn," the author sets what is being reported up as a story being retold to the audience, dictating the meaning and imposing on how the jury is to know what is occurring. The prosecutor selects the lexical terms and the grammatical constructions that express judgment and moral evaluation of Chauvin's conduct. The use of words and/or phrases like "betrayed," "excessive and unreasonable force," and "grinding and crushing" is strongly evaluative, as they highlight the conduct as morally and legally wrong. Furthermore, the sequence from "knees on his neck and on his back" to "until the very life was squeezed out of him" employs progressive intensification, linguistically constructing a climax of violence. The rhetorical use of the interjection "no, ladies and gentlemen" is employed to command jurors' attention and to focus attention on the severity of the injury being done to Floyd. As such, the whole utterance is aimed at establishing a moral case, aligning the jury with the prosecution's stance, and portraying Chauvin as guilty.

The prosecutor is the author in 3(b) and gets to decide what the jury will see as occurring at the event. The use of the truth modal 'will' in "you will learn" communicates a high level of certitude to mark the guilt of the speaker with what transpires in the narrative and is controlling the meaning and interpretation of what is occurring by the reader. In this instance, the task of the author is to explain how long nine minutes and 29 seconds are and how much is the suffering. The specificity of time, "nine minutes and 29 seconds," adds accuracy and realism to the facts and ensures truthfulness, but the noun phrase "excessive force" entails judgment of appraisal in the sense that it conveys that the action is ethically and legally wrong.

In 3(c), the prosecutor becomes the author, constructing how the jury perceives the goals of the trial and the rules of law. By saying in so many words, "we have two goals," the speaker constructs the story, inducing the audience to become aware of the procedural and ethical boundaries of the trial. The author's role here is to construct anticipation and establish the standards of fairness. The lexicalization in the noun phrase "fair trial" and the verb phrase "presumed to be innocent" invokes legalized formal vocabulary that indicates procedural justice. The employment of declarative sentences generates authority and communicates a sense of forthrightness, reducing doubt about the aims of the trial. The numerical progression of objectives (first, second) frames the information and expresses structured thinking.

*(b). The Defense as an Author*

The speaker's role of an author is also adopted by the defense attorney and is linguistically realized by directive and declarative speech acts, evaluative language, lexical choices, and truth modality.

Excerpts (4)

4(a) Reason is an idea that wholly permeates our law, our legal system, and it forms the foundation, and you will see and hear that repeatedly throughout the course of this trial.

4(b) Common sense tells us that we need to examine the totality of the circumstances to determine the meaning of evidence and how it can be applied to the questions of reasonableness of actions and reactions.

4(c) This becomes important as we learn about police practices, because what you will learn is that when an officer responds to what is sometimes a routine and minimal event, it often evolves into a greater and more serious event.

In 4(a), the defense attorney identifies himself with being the authoritative voice of knowledge and interpretation, foregrounding "reason" as a master concept that guides legal analysis. The speaker does not act or bring actions to life but constructs the ideational framework for the jurors to interpret evidence. The employment of the abstract noun "reason" mirrors a physical action for a conceptual principle, and the evaluative lexis in "wholly permeates" and "forms the foundation" emphasizes universality and authority. Additionally, the employment of the truth modality in "you will see and hear that repeatedly" directs the attention of jurors to future evidence and, thus, claims control over interpretation.

In 4(b), the defense is the source of interpretive authority. The statement attributes guidance to "common sense," but linguistically, the defense authors the principal and instructs the jury on how to process evidence, shaping their analytical stance. The employment of the abstract noun phrase "common sense" foregrounds an evaluative principle rather than an action, and the use of the modal and obligation verb in "need to examine" signals necessity, guiding jurors' behavior in evaluating evidence. The complex sentence structure with causal reasoning connects the principal "common sense" to the action "determine the meaning of evidence," emphasizing logical coherence.

In 4(c), the defense performs the function of a writer, projecting himself as a source of knowledge and meaning. The assertion employs cause-and-effect reasoning and explains how a normal police practice may lead to more, guiding the jury's understanding of what follows. The terms of assessment in "important," "routine and minor event," and "larger and more severe event" is the weight and scale of consequences. Moreover, the use of the causal adverbials "because" and "as" makes a logical connection between the witnessed action and its effect, and the use of the future modal in "you will learn" directs jurors' attention towards future evidence while projecting authorial control of interpretation. Table 2 summarizes the footing through the author's role within the opening statements in Floyd's murder trial.

TABLE 2  
FOOTING THROUGH THE ROLE OF AN AUTHOR IN FLOYD'S TRIAL

Speaker	Footing role	Linguistic strategy	Pragmatic function
Prosecution	Author	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Declarative speech acts</li> <li>- Truth modality</li> <li>- Emotive language</li> <li>- Lexical choices</li> <li>- Temporal markers</li> <li>- Repetition.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Directing jury attention to sequence of events</li> <li>- Establishing narrative authority; guide jury interpretation</li> <li>- Clarifying trial goals</li> </ul>
Defense	Author	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Directive speech acts</li> <li>- Declarative speech acts</li> <li>- Evaluative language</li> <li>- Lexical choices</li> <li>- Truth modality.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Establish interpretive authority</li> <li>- Direct jury interpretation</li> <li>- contextualize escalation</li> </ul>

### C. Footing Through the Role of a Principal in Floyd's Trial Opening Statements

A further speaker's role that is adopted by the two attorneys in their opening statements is the role of a principal. Again, the two attorneys assume this speaker's role to persuade the court of their own goals.

#### (a). *The Prosecution as a Principal*

In his opening statement, the prosecution attorney undertakes the principal footing, stating beliefs and evaluations about police policy. Such a principal role is realized by some linguistic strategies, including the use of modality, evaluative language, passive constructions, nominalization, repetition, and temporal adverbs.

Excerpts (5)

5(a) You will learn in this case quite a lot about the Minneapolis Police Department's use of force policy. What you're going to see and learn a lot about is what is the standard for applying force against individuals.

5(b) The force used shall be consistent with current Minneapolis Police Department training.

5(c) From moment to moment, what may be reasonable in the first minute may not be reasonable in the second minute, the fourth minute or the ninth minute and 29 seconds.

In 5(a), the prosecutor positions the Minneapolis Police Department and its policies as the principal, the authoritative source of rules and standards. Linguistically, the prosecutor attributes norms and guidelines to the MPD rather than themselves, signaling that these are institutional directives, not personal opinions. This establishes a layer of authority that lends credibility to the prosecution's argument. In doing so, the prosecutor employs various linguistic strategies, including repetition in "you will learn" and "what you're going to see and learn," which emphasizes the instructional and evidential nature of the discourse. Also, the use of phrases like "use of force policy" and "standard for applying force" invokes institutionalized, formal language associated with rules and protocols. The declarative sentence is utilized to assign responsibility to the MPD as the authority, which ultimately differentiates the speaker's role from that of the principal. Most importantly, through attributing norms to the MPD, the prosecution establishes the legitimacy of the allegations of using excessive force, which ultimately has the function of guiding the jury to know what expected behavior is and where the deviation lies.

Likewise, in 5(b), the prosecutor attributes normative authority to MPD, presenting its training as the guiding standard. Significantly, the modal verb "shall" signals obligation, framing the MPD as the principal whose standards define lawful and ethical conduct. The speaker is delegating responsibility for normative evaluation to the institution rather than asserting personal judgment. The lexical choices in "shall be consistent" and "current Minneapolis Police Department training" convey formalized obligation and compliance with institutional rules and emphasize official procedural authority and up-to-date standards, respectively.

The same principal role continues in 5(c), wherein the prosecutor backgrounds individual judgment in favor of legal and procedural norms as the rule, casting reasonableness as a relative, situational measure. In insisting on "what may be reasonable," the weight of the assessment of Chauvin's behavior is implicitly bound to normative standards of law and professional policing standards rather than individual judgment. Furthermore, the use of temporal repetitions in "first minute... second minute... fourth minute... ninth minute and 29 seconds" is highly evocative in stressing granularity and exactness, signaling that reasonableness is measured on a continuous scale, not statically. Also, the oppositional structure in "may... may not" linguistically inscribes shifting acquiescence, noting that adherence to standards is moment-dependent.

#### (b). *The Defense as a Principal*

The defense attorney assumes the role of a principal, which is maintained by some linguistic tools, such as the use of the past-tense factual verbs, evaluative contrast, nominalization, negation, abstract nouns, declarative speech acts, future-oriented directives, and nominalization.

Excerpts (6)

6(a) Derek Chauvin did exactly what he had been trained to do over the course of his 19 year career. The use of force is not attractive, but it is a necessary component of policing.

6(b) There is no political or social cause in this courtroom.

6(c) At the conclusion of this evidence, you will be instructed as to the law...when you review the actual evidence...there will only be one just verdict and that is to find Mr. Chauvin not guilty.

In 6(a), the defense assumes the role of a principal, placing Derek Chauvin's actions under the rubric of institutional norms and professional training. The focus shifts to universal legal and ethical standards that dictate police conduct, condoning his actions under accepted norms. The precise application of the past-tense and fact verbs "did what he had been trained to do" to emphasize conformity to training rather than individual initiative, and the evaluative words "not attractive, but necessary" to contrast subjective perception with objective need, puts force into an ethical category. The other linguistic device to rehearse the role of principal is nominalization in "component of policing," abstracting force into a structural element of professional practice and depersonalizing it. In this context, the defense's language justifies Chauvin's behavior within professional norms and locates the defense's rhetoric around institutional principles, minimizing individual blame and establishing procedural legitimacy.

In 6(b), the defense adopts the principal stance by locating the courtroom as a site of rule by legal norms and objectivity in preference to political or social agendas. The defense believes that the trial must be explained in terms of the institutional and procedural values of the law rather than those of extrinsic influences. The lexicalization of "political" and "social cause" makes possible biases or influences conceptually rather than concretely. Further, the negation in "no...because" emphatically excludes external influence and confirms equality. Crucially, the core function here puts the defense on the side of advocating institutional norms, framing the trial as a location governed by evidence and law alone.

In 6(c), the defense adopts the role of a principal by resting on legal authority as well as on normative advice. The text positions the verdict in a place where it must be pronounced according to law and evidence, elevating Chauvin's innocence as the only legally justified outcome. This speaker's central function is expressed through a range of linguistic devices, such as use of the truth modal 'will' in "you will be instructed" and "you will review" to guide the jurors' attention and build procedural expectation, use of the evaluative lexis in "only one just verdict" to convey exclusivity and legal-moral appropriateness, and use of nominalization in "conclusion of this evidence" and "actual evidence" to build the defense account of legality and procedural appropriateness, leading to Chauvin's acquittal being the sole legal option. Table 3 summarizes the footing through the principal role within the opening statements in Floyd's murder trial.

TABLE 3  
FOOTING THROUGH THE ROLE OF A PRINCIPAL IN FLOYD'S TRIAL

Speaker	Footing role	Linguistic strategy	Pragmatic function
Prosecution	Principal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Evaluative language</li> <li>- Modality (truth, obligation)</li> <li>- Passive voice</li> <li>- Nominalization</li> <li>- Temporal adverbs</li> <li>- Repetition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Legitimizing prosecution claims</li> <li>- Highlighting dynamic evaluation of force</li> <li>- Conveying policy compliance</li> </ul>
Defense	Principal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- nominalization</li> <li>- Past tense</li> <li>- Evaluative contrasts</li> <li>- Speech acts (directives, declaratives)</li> <li>- Modality (truth)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Justifying actions</li> <li>- Establishing neutrality</li> <li>- Directing jurors toward verdict</li> <li>- Asserting legality and fairness</li> </ul>

## V. DISCUSSION

The above forensic linguistic analysis of footing in the opening statements of George Floyd's murder trial (2021) reveals that both lawyers strategically alter footing to establish credibility, manage alignment with jurors, and negotiate moral and institutional power. The findings revealed in this study demonstrate that footing, as hypothesized by Goffman (1981), is not static but rather changing alignment and is a discursive and linguistic tool by which power, responsibility, and identity are negotiated in the courtroom. Both prosecution and defense exhibit ubiquitous back-and-forth switching between the animator, author, and principal positions, each taking on distinct persuasive and ideological purposes. The patterns and objectives of these footing shifts are significantly different across the two sides; however, the prosecution's foundation aims to establish aggregate moral agreement and institutional legitimacy, whereas the defense seeks to empathize with the defendant, highlight legal technicality, and disentangle Chauvin's personal agency from institutional blame. Analytically, footing practiced by the two attorneys in their opening statements is linguistically manifested in various strategies, including the use of speech acts, agency, active and passive voice constructions, nominalization, evaluative and emotive language, lexicalization, temporal markers, and modality. These linguistic strategies are representative of the three speakers' roles adopted by the attorneys throughout the opening statements in Floyd's murder trial. This finding reconciles with many previous studies (e.g., Sun, 2015; Henderson et al., 2016; McEntee-Atalianis & Vessey, 2025), whose contributions highlight the significance of these linguistic strategies in communicating the various participation roles in courtroom discourse.

It is analytically shown that the opening statement of the prosecution, given by Jerry Blackwell, revealed disproportionate use of collective and moral bases. Institutional voice is used by Blackwell for a major part of the

presentation, relying on the justice system and overall social morality. The recurring use of inclusive pronouns, such as "we" and "our" demonstrate a common moral space between the prosecution, jury, and society. Blackwell's footing also fluctuates between narrator and moral commentator. In describing the dying words of Floyd, he employs a humanized, sympathetic footing when he stated, "You will learn that Mr. Floyd said 27 times he couldn't breathe." The quoted word is employed as the footing animation that Goffman (1981) demands, a language reenactment that aligns the speaker in order to become an animator of another's voice. Putting Floyd's own words in context establishes emotional proximity and challenges jurors to adopt a morally invested point of view. The prosecution's opening statement also provides epistemic authority by oscillating between ground that is experiential and evidence-based. Sentences such as "you will see, you will hear, you will know" communicate certainty and remind the prosecution of the author's and principal's status. The recurrence of modal verbs, such as "will see" and "will hear" reiterates epistemic commitment, labeling the coming evidence certain and clear (Heffer, 2005; Khafaga, 2023). Significantly, the prosecution's foundation creates a triadic congruence between law, morality, and belonging in the group, placing Floyd as a structural injustice victim while constructing the legal system as the reparation instrument.

Contradictorily, the defense opening statement by Eric Nelson shows a different footing strategy of focusing on distance, technical rationality, and legal precision. The defense footing was between institutional explainer and neutral commentator, avoiding emotive alignment and instead constructing the case in evidentiary and procedural terms. Nelson is inclined to adopt a footing of fact mediator, and as such, he adopts a reported footing in the sense of "you will see body camera footage" and "you will hear expert testimony." This footing constructs a position of objectivity and professionalism (Cotterill, 2003). Furthermore, the strategic footing shift also allows Nelson to embed Chauvin's position in an updated manner. Through pronoun shifting and passive voice, such as "force was used" and "the officers reacted," Nelson decreases Chauvin's active agency, constructing what Goffman (1981) referred to as footing misalignment, a move that displaces the speaker from the central focus of moral culpability. This discursive distancing is typical of defensive courtroom practice (Luchjenbroers, 1993; Heffer, 2005; Gupta, 2022). The defense also employs recontextualization of institutional agency, frequently invoking "the Minneapolis Police Department training" and "policy-approved techniques." This footing shifts agency out of Chauvin and onto the institution, portraying the defendant as an instrument of policy rather than an independent moral actor. This is consistent with what Fairclough (1995) calls institutional intertextuality, meaning that the use of institutional discourse to legitimate and emasculate personal blame. Obviously, Nelson's use of modality, as in "may show," "could indicate," and "might suggest," exhibits low epistemic commitment, indicating uncertainty and hence calling for jurors to adopt a cautious interpretive stance. This footing shift creates an evidential framework of reasonable doubt, the target of the defense's linguistic performance.

The analysis further clarifies how footing in courtroom discourse functions as both an interactional and ideological mechanism. Interactionally, footing allows speakers to negotiate professional (attorney, judge) and lay (juror) participants' power asymmetry. Ideologically, footing allows counsel to inscribe larger social meanings like justice, race, and morality into trial discourse. In the Floyd trial, footing is both a linguistic resource and a performative social act of positioning. The prosecution's footing appeals to society's narratives of racial injustice and invokes moral solidarity, whereas the defense's footing appeals to institutional procedure and individual neutrality. These irreconcilable orientations are an instance of what Goffman (1981) refers to as 'production format layering,' in which speakers inhabit a variety of frames of reference (professional, moral, and institutional) at once. The ideological significance of the findings consists of the ways footing constructs juror alignment. The moral footing of the prosecution's opening statement conveys emotional and communal engagement, on the one hand, and the technical footing of the defense's opening statement establishes cognitive distance, on the other. These alignments are indicative of how courtroom discourse functions as a site of linguistic and ideological negotiation between legal rationality and moral justice (Conley & O'Barr, 2005; Cotterill, 2003).

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the use of Goffman's (1981) interaction model of footing in the opening statements of the George Floyd murder trial, focusing on the linguistic strategies employed by the prosecution and defense to convey ideological positioning. The analysis revealed systematic differences across animator, author, and principal roles. The prosecution strategically used animator footing to voice the victim and bystanders, author footing to construct morally evaluative narratives, and principal footing to assert ethical and normative judgments. Conversely, the defense used animator footing to voice officers and witnesses procedurally, author footing to frame narratives rationally, and principal footing to assert legality and adherence to police training. These findings directly address the research questions by showing how footing roles are employed to shape juror perception, convey ideological stance, and achieve trial objectives, confirming the relevance of footing analysis in forensic linguistics.

For future research, this study recommends a number of further studies as follows: First, examining other trials would allow for cross-case comparability to determine whether the footing strategies revealed in the current study are stable across legal case types. Second, combining multimodal analysis, i.e., gestures, facial expressions, and intonation, could reveal how nonverbal signals interact with linguistic footing to influence juror interpretation. Third, investigating juror response to different footing strategies may provide empirical evidence of their effect on persuasion, integrating discourse analysis and social cognition and legal psychology. Finally, cross-jurisdictional and cross-cultural comparison

may investigate how legal convention and courtroom culture affect the use of footing in determining the use of strategic communication in forensic linguistics contexts.

#### APPENDIX

Link to the two opening statements of George Floyd's murder trial:

<https://www.famous-trials.com/george-floyd/2718-opening-arguments-in-the-george-floyd-murder-chauvin-trial>

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