

Legal Discourse and Cultural Meaning in a Bangka Manuscript: Insights for English Language Learning

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*Hilda Rakerda, Resti Amalia^{ab} 

¹²Universitas Bangka Belitung, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: hildarakerda@ubb.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Historical legal manuscripts from peripheral regions remain underexamined in English language studies, despite their value as authentic discourse and cultural evidence. This study addresses this gap through an analysis of a nineteenth-century Bangka legal manuscript documenting a local trade transaction. Drawing on critical discourse analysis and interviews to validate the manuscript's historical context, the study identifies salient features of legal discourse, including formulaic phrasing, performative utterances, and culturally grounded constructions of authority and legitimacy. These features demonstrate legal language as a socially situated practice shaped by local norms and institutional relations. The study further highlights pedagogical implications for English language learning, positioning historical legal texts as authentic materials for developing genre and discourse awareness, intercultural understanding, and critical reading skills.

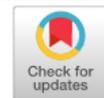
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INTRODUCTION

Historical manuscripts constitute an important yet often underutilized source for understanding the social, cultural, and linguistic practices of past societies (Berikashvili, 2025; Crowther, 2022; Nikolaidou et al., 2022). Among these sources, legal manuscripts are particularly significant because they document how authority, legitimacy, and social relations were constructed and negotiated through language (Berger, 2025; Gomes & Pina, 2024; Mišević, 2023). In many regions of Southeast Asia, legal documents written in local languages and scripts functioned not only as administrative instruments but also as reflections of indigenous worldviews, legal reasoning, and cultural values (Maftuhin, 2023; Siregar & Yahaya, 2023; Koeswiryono et al., 2023). Despite their importance, such manuscripts remain marginal in English-language scholarship, where studies of legal discourse tend to privilege Western legal traditions and contemporary institutional texts (Giusteri, 2025; Gallagher, 2024; McDowell, 2023). Within legal discourse studies, research commonly focuses on how legal texts perform institutional authority through genre conventions, evidentiality, and legitimating strategies, yet historical non-Western legal manuscripts are rarely treated as central discourse data.

Recent developments in discourse studies emphasize that legal language is not a neutral or purely technical medium but a socially embedded practice shaped by historical, ideological, and cultural contexts (Berger, 2025; Doerr, 2023; Thompson, 2023). Legal texts encode power relations, social norms, and culturally specific mechanisms of legitimation through formulaic expressions, performative acts, and patterned textual structures (Berger, 2025; Mišević, 2023; Polomac et al., 2023). Cultural approaches emphasize that patterned language use indexes shared cultural assumptions about social relations, moral responsibility, and legitimate authority. Research in linguistic anthropology and discourse studies demonstrates that recurrent textual features, such as honorific forms, lineage references, truth

claims, witness statements, and religious or calendrical markers, function as indexical signs that connect linguistic form to culturally specific models of personhood and social order (Ochs, 1992; Silverstein, 2003). In legal texts, these patterns do not merely fulfill formal requirements but embed transactions within locally recognized moral and social frameworks, where legitimacy derives from communal recognition and ethical norms rather than from institutional enforcement alone (Heffer et al., 2020). Studies of legal and cultural discourse further show that written documents serve as sites where cultural values are stabilized and made durable through language, transforming individual intent into socially accountable action (Tiersma & Solan, 2022). From this perspective, legal manuscripts provide valuable evidence of how culture is organized, negotiated, and reproduced through discourse in historically situated communities.

This perspective resonates with applied linguistics research that highlights the role of authentic texts in developing learners' discourse awareness and critical literacy (Baker & Santoro, 2023; Giusteri, 2025; Patterson, 2023). However, the range of texts used as authentic materials in English language learning remains limited and largely dominated by contemporary genres from Anglophone contexts (Pentón Herrera & Becker, 2023; Parks et al., 2025; Schenker, 2024). In EFL/ESL pedagogy, authentic materials refer to texts originally produced for real social purposes rather than for classroom instruction, such as letters, news reports, forms, or legal documents. They are valued because they expose learners to how English is actually used in context, including register choices, genre organization, and pragmatic norms. Unlike simplified textbooks, authentic texts display natural lexical patterns, conventional phrasing, and culturally shaped ways of expressing stance, obligation, or authority. Working with such materials supports critical reading because learners must interpret meaning in relation to audience, purpose, and context, not only decode vocabulary and grammar. It also develops discourse competence by training learners to recognize genre "moves," coherence patterns, and rhetorical strategies used to achieve communicative goals. With appropriate scaffolding, authentic materials can strengthen learners' awareness of language variation and social meaning, preparing them for academic, professional, and intercultural communication where texts are rarely simplified.

Related studies on historical documents in language education have primarily examined letters, diaries, or archival narratives to support reading and intercultural learning, while legal manuscripts, especially those produced in indigenous scripts, have received little sustained attention as objects of discourse analysis for pedagogical use. Within Southeast Asia, Malay legal manuscripts written in Jawi script represent a rich yet insufficiently explored body of texts that can broaden understandings of non-Western legal traditions and discourse practices (Maftuhin, 2023; Siregar & Yahaya, 2023; Koeswiryono et al., 2023). These manuscripts were widely used in the nineteenth century to document land sales, inheritance arrangements, and declarations of rights, integrating Islamic legal concepts, customary (adat) law, and local sociopolitical structures (Mišević, 2023; Berger, 2025; Crowther, 2022). Their linguistic features—such as formulaic openings, performative declarations, and detailed enumeration of property—serve not merely stylistic functions but operate as culturally grounded strategies to establish authority and legal certainty (Berger, 2025; Doerr, 2023; Polomac et al., 2023). At the same time, English language education increasingly emphasizes intercultural understanding and critical reading skills (Amazan et al., 2026; Pentón Herrera & Becker, 2023; Vu, 2022). Learners are expected not only to comprehend texts but also to analyze how meaning is shaped by culture, history, and power relations (Giusteri, 2025; Patterson, 2023; Thompson, 2023). Authentic historical documents from non-Western contexts provide valuable opportunities to meet these goals, as they challenge dominant assumptions about legal language and expose learners to alternative models of authority and legitimacy (Koeswiryono et al., 2023; Amazan et al., 2026; Giusteri, 2025). Nevertheless, such materials are rarely incorporated into English language learning due to limited accessibility, lack of pedagogically oriented analyses, and disciplinary separation between manuscript studies and applied linguistics (Nikolaidou et al., 2022; Pritchard et al., 2025; Schenker, 2024).

Despite increasing scholarly attention to discourse analysis and intercultural approaches in language education, significant research gaps remain. Historical legal manuscripts from peripheral or non-Western regions continue to be marginal in English-language scholarship, resulting in an imbalanced understanding of legal discourse that privileges dominant Western traditions (Berikashvili, 2025; Crowther, 2022). While historical manuscript studies have demonstrated the cultural and linguistic richness of premodern texts, locally produced legal documents written in indigenous scripts are rarely examined as meaningful discourse practices. This limitation restricts comparative perspectives on how legal authority and legitimacy are constructed across cultures. Within Malay studies, existing research has largely concentrated on philological description, religious interpretation, or historical contextualization of manuscripts, often overlooking their discourse features (Maftuhin, 2023; Siregar & Yahaya, 2023). Linguistic elements such as formulaic expressions, performative statements, and structured enumeration are frequently treated as stylistic conventions rather than analyzed as strategic mechanisms for establishing legal validity, social order, and communal accountability. As a result, the cultural logic embedded in Malay legal discourse remains insufficiently articulated. In parallel, English language education research increasingly emphasizes the use of authentic texts to foster discourse awareness, critical literacy, and intercultural competence. However, the range of materials employed in English language learning remains narrow and predominantly modern, privileging contemporary genres from Anglophone contexts. Historical legal manuscripts are rarely considered as pedagogical resources, despite their potential to expose learners to alternative models of legal language and culturally situated meaning-making (Giusteri, 2025; Koeswiryono et al., 2023; Pentón Herrera & Becker, 2023). These disconnects between manuscript studies and language pedagogy limit the educational impact of historical discourse research.

Building on prior scholarship, this study extends existing work by foregrounding a Bangka Malay legal manuscript as a discourse event, rather than solely a philological artifact, and by articulating its relevance for English language learning through the analysis of genre structure, performativity, and culturally specific legitimation strategies. Responding to these gaps, the present study examines a nineteenth-century Bangka Malay legal manuscript written in Jawi script. Employing qualitative discourse analysis, the study investigates how legal authority and cultural meaning are constructed through linguistic practices within the manuscript and explores its relevance as an authentic resource for English language learning. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research question: How does the nineteenth-century Bangka Malay legal manuscript construct legal authority and cultural meaning through discourse, and what implications does this have for English language learning?

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design with a critical discourse-analytic and interpretive orientation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A qualitative approach was adopted because the research aims to understand how language constructs meaning within a specific socio-cultural and historical context rather than to measure variables or test hypotheses statistically (Miles et al., 2014). In particular, the study examines legal discourse and cultural meaning embedded in a historical manuscript and considers how these linguistic features offer insights for English language learning, an aim that aligns with qualitative and interpretive traditions in applied linguistics. The research design is text-based and exploratory, treating the manuscript as a primary linguistic artifact and a source of authentic discourse. Discourse analysis was employed as the main analytical framework because it enables language to be examined not only at the lexical or grammatical level but also as a form of social practice shaped by power, culture, and history (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 2014). This approach is particularly appropriate for legal texts, in which meaning is produced through formulaic expressions, performative language, and culturally embedded conventions that function to establish authority and legitimacy (Maftuhin, 2023; Siregar & Yahaya, 2023).

An interpretive perspective was integrated to address the historical distance between the nineteenth-century text and contemporary readers, allowing meanings to be understood within their original socio-legal context rather than through modern assumptions (Berger, 2025; Crowther, 2022).

The primary object of this study is a nineteenth-century Bangka legal manuscript documenting a local trade transaction. The manuscript records the sale of productive trees and contains formal declarations, identification of the transacting parties, witness references, and monetary information. Written in Arabic-Malay (Jawi) script, the text represents a locally produced legal document embedded in a specific historical, cultural, and socio-economic setting. The manuscript was selected through purposive sampling using four criteria. First, it had to be a legal-transactional document rather than a religious, literary, or administrative text, evidenced by the presence of declarative sale statements, itemized property, and a closing authentication formula. Second, it needed to be historically attributable to the nineteenth century, indicated by internal dating (Hijri year and month) and corroborated through contextual information from the manuscript custodian. Third, the manuscript had to be regionally specific to Bangka and reflect local socio-economic practice, shown by the place reference (Mentok) and the transaction focus on productive assets typical of agrarian exchange. Fourth, it had to be sufficiently legible and complete to allow systematic transliteration, translation, and discourse analysis, including identifiable sections for parties, objects of exchange, and witnessing. On the basis of these criteria, the manuscript provides a rare example of indigenous legal discourse from a peripheral region that remains underrepresented in English-language and discourse-oriented research. It offers rich linguistic data, formulaic legal expressions, performative constructions, and culturally grounded representations of authority and legitimacy, relevant to historical inquiry, discourse analysis, and English language education (Giusteri, 2025; Koeswiryo et al., 2023).

Data Collection

Data collection involved two primary techniques: document analysis and semi-structured interview. First, the manuscript was collected as a documentary source and subjected to close textual examination. The document analysis process included repeated readings of the manuscript, transliteration into a more accessible script, and translation into English. This process was necessary to ensure accurate identification of linguistic features and to make the text analyzable within an English-language academic framework. During this stage, the researcher annotated the text to mark legal expressions, performative clauses, lexical choices, and structural elements relevant to legal discourse.

Second, a series of semi-structured interviews was conducted to support the interpretation of the manuscript. A total of five interviews were carried out on different occasions with a Bangka manuscript expert who collects and curates original Bangka manuscripts and serves as the head of an epigraphy unit specializing in the analysis of Bangka manuscripts for the Sumatra and Kalimantan regions. The expert was selected as the sole participant because of their recognized expertise, long-term engagement with Bangka manuscript collections, and detailed knowledge of manuscript provenance, preservation practices, script conventions, and local historical context. Conducting multiple interviews with the same key informant enabled the researcher to obtain richer, more consistent contextual insights and to clarify interpretive issues that emerged during transliteration and translation. The decision to conduct five interviews was motivated by the manuscript's historical complexity and the need for iterative verification. Repeated interviews allowed the researcher to confirm contextual claims (e.g., origin, circulation, and function of the document), refine interpretations of key legal expressions, and resolve ambiguities arising from partially unclear handwriting or terminology. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in an informal, conversational setting to encourage detailed responses. Each session lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and focused on provenance, ownership history, preservation, and the manuscript's social and legal functions. With informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded, reviewed, summarized, and thematically coded. The interview data were used to

contextualize and validate interpretations derived from the textual analysis, thereby strengthening the credibility and rigor of the study.

Trustworthiness was ensured through methodological triangulation and iterative validation. The discourse-analytic interpretations derived from the manuscript were systematically cross-checked with contextual evidence obtained through five semi-structured interviews with the manuscript owner, who served as the key informant and custodian. Conducting repeated interviews enabled clarification of provenance, social function, and community meanings, and allowed consistency checks across sessions, thereby strengthening credibility. To support expert validation, the transliteration process and selected English translations were reviewed by a competent reader familiar with Jawi and Malay manuscript conventions to verify legibility, lexical interpretation, and the accuracy of core legal formulae. Dependability was further enhanced by maintaining an audit trail, including annotated manuscript excerpts, coding notes, and interpretive memos documenting analytical decisions from initial feature identification to final thematic interpretation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with an interpretive and contextual orientation to examine how the manuscript constructs legal authority, legitimacy, and social relations through language. CDA was selected because it treats legal discourse as a form of social practice that both reflects and produces power relations within specific historical and cultural settings (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 2014). The analysis proceeded in four stages to ensure analytical rigor. First, the manuscript was transliterated and translated, then segmented into functional units (opening, identification of parties, transaction clauses, enumeration of property, and closing/witnessing). Second, linguistic features were coded, focusing on formulaic expressions, performative declarations, modality, lexical choices, and patterns of repetition that signal legal formality and certainty. Third, CDA was applied to identify discursive strategies that legitimate the transaction, including authorization (status markers, lineage, honorifics), evidentiality (witnessing, signatures), and rationalization (itemization and boundary references), as well as role positioning between seller, buyer, and witnesses. Fourth, the CDA findings were interpreted within the socio-historical context to explain how legality was socially produced and then conceptually linked to English language learning (ESP, discourse awareness, and critical reading), without claiming classroom outcomes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study employed qualitative content analysis guided by a historical-hermeneutic framework to examine a Bangka manuscript dated 1874. The analysis aimed to uncover the cultural, economic, and social meanings embedded in the text and to interpret how legal discourse functioned within the socio-historical context of nineteenth-century Bangka. The findings demonstrate that the manuscript, although formally structured as a receipt for the sale of trees, conveys layered meanings that extend beyond its immediate economic function. Through its language, structure, and symbolic elements, the manuscript reflects a formalized system of local trade, cultural values related to authority and trust, and the interaction between local traditions, Islamic identity, and colonial administration. To provide a visual and material context for the analysis, figure 1 presents the original Bangka legal manuscript examined in this study.

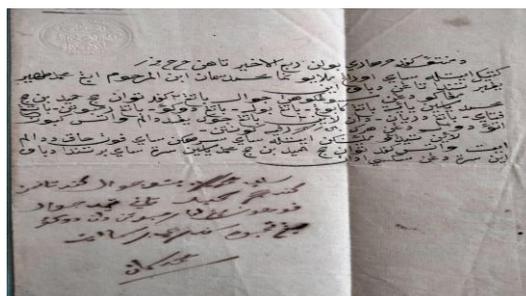


Figure 1. Bangka Manuscript

Table 1 presents a word-by-word translation of selected lexical items extracted from the source text in order to clarify the relationship between the linguistic data and the interpretations proposed in this study. Table 1 serves as an empirical foundation for the findings by making explicit how meaning is constructed at the lexical level.

Table 1. The Word Translation of the Manuscript

Original Malay Text	English Translation
<i>Di mentok kepada 9 hari bulan robiul akhir tahun 1297</i>	In Mentok, on the 9th day of the month of Rabiul Akhir in the year 1297
<i>Ketika itulah saya orang melayu nama muhammad Saman Ibnu Almarhum Abang Muhammad Thahir</i>	At that time, I, a Malay man named Muhammad Saman, son of the late Abang Muhammad Thahir
<i>Yang bertanda tangan di bawah ini</i>	the undersigned
<i>mengaku dengan sesungguhnya jual batang2 kepada tuan Haji Muhammad Hamid</i>	Truly declare that I sell the trees to Mr. Haji Muhammad Hamid
<i>Bin Haji Muhammad Yasin yaitu batang kabung-batang buluh-batang duku-batang rambutan- batang Petai- batang durian- dan lain2 batang juga yang di dalam watas kebun</i>	son of Haji Muhammad Yasin, several trees consisting of kabung trees, bamboo, duku trees, rambutan trees, petai trees, durian trees, and other trees located within the boundaries of the garden,
<i>Atau dalam dengan harga 150 gulden rupiah kontan-</i>	for the sum of 150 gulden in cash.
<i>Lain tidak melainkan itulah saya serahkan saya punya hak di dalam</i>	Henceforth, I relinquish and transfer my rights within those boundaries
<i>itu watas kepada tuan Haji Hamid bin Haji Muhammad Yasin serta saya bertanda di bawah</i>	to Tuan Haji Muhammad Hamid, son of Haji Muhammad Yasin. In affirmation of this matter, I have hereunto affixed my signature,
<i>Ini serta dengan saksi adanya</i>	together with the presence of witnesses.

Legal Discourse and Textual Meaning

Historical legal manuscripts are often read primarily as historical or economic records, while their function as discourse-based legal instruments receives less analytical attention. As a result, the ways in which language constructs legal authority, enacts transactions, and prevents dispute in premodern societies are frequently underexplored. This issue is particularly evident in studies of Malay legal manuscripts, where linguistic features tend to be treated as stylistic conventions rather than as mechanisms of legal action. Addressing this gap requires examining how specific textual features operate as legal discourse rather than merely documenting events.

The data for this analysis (see Figure 1 and Table 1) consist of a nineteenth-century Bangka Malay legal manuscript documenting the sale of productive trees. The text includes declarative statements, detailed itemization of goods, the specification of monetary value, identification of transacting parties, and the presence of witnesses. At the textual level, the manuscript displays clear features of legal discourse through formulaic expressions, performatives, and markers of authority/legitimacy that recur across the transaction record. First, the manuscript employs formulaic framing typical of legal documentation. The opening situates the agreement in time and place "*Di mentok kepada 9 hari bulan robiul akhir tahun 1297*" (In Mentok, on the 9th day of Rabiul Akhir, 1297) and is followed by a conventional self-identification of the legal subject "*Ketika itulah saya orang melayu nama Muhammad Saman Ibnu Almarhum Abang Muhammad Thahir*" (At that time, I... Muhammad Saman, son of the late...). The text also uses the formal signatory formula "*Yang bertanda tangan di bawah ini*" (the undersigned) and closes with a conventional witnessing clause "*Ini serta dengan saksi adanya*"

(together with the presence of witnesses). These repeated structural moves (dating, identification, undersigning, and witnessing) function as legal genre cues that signal document formality and procedural completeness. Second, the legal act is realized through performative and declarative wording that does not merely report a sale but enacts it. The clause *“mengaku dengan sesungguhnya jual”* (truly declare that I sell) explicitly performs the act of selling and establishes the speaker’s commitment as a legal agent. The transfer of rights is then reinforced through another performative expression *“Lain tidak melainkan itulah saya serahkan saya punya hak”* (Henceforth, I relinquish and transfer my rights) which linguistically executes the handover of entitlement. In addition, the fixed monetary statement *“dengan harga 150 gulden rupiah kontan”* (for the sum of 150 gulden in cash) operates as a transactional performative, finalizing consideration and strengthening enforceability by specifying payment modality.

Third, the manuscript constructs authority and legitimacy through formal authentication and social validation mechanisms. The inclusion of named parties and lineage (*“bin/ibnu...”*) anchors identity and accountability, while the explicit designation of the buyer (*“tuan Haji Muhammad Hamid bin Haji Muhammad Yasin”*) indexes social status and recognized authority within the community. The clause *“serta saya bertanda di bawah”* (I have hereunto affixed my signature) functions as an authentication marker, indicating a binding commitment through inscription. Finally, the presence of witnesses *“Ini serta dengan saksi adanya”* provides communal endorsement, positioning the transaction as publicly verifiable rather than private speech. Taken together, these textual features show how the manuscript achieves legal validity through a patterned legal register: formulaic framing, performative enactment, and legitimating structures that authenticate the agreement within its socio-historical context.

Cultural and Social Values Embedded in the Text

Beyond its formal legal purpose, the manuscript (see Figure 1) conveys important cultural and social values that reflect the worldview of nineteenth-century Bangka society. The language of the document reveals that legal texts were not merely instruments for recording transactions but also mediums through which moral norms, communal relations, and religious principles were articulated. Through its discourse, the manuscript demonstrates how legal language functioned to organize social order, establish trust among parties, and reinforce ethical responsibility within the community. The data (see Figure 1 and Table 1) consist of a Bangka legal manuscript dated 1874 that documents the sale of productive trees. The manuscript contains several key linguistic features that reveal cultural and social meanings. First, the seller introduces himself with explicit ethnic and genealogical identification: *“saya orang Melayu nama Muhammad Saman Ibnu Almarhum Abang Muhammad Thahir”*. This statement situates the transaction within lineage-based identity and social legitimacy. Second, the transaction is enacted through a performative declaration: *“mengaku dengan sesungguhnya jual batang-batang kepada tuan Haji Muhammad Hamid”*. The phrase emphasizes truthfulness and moral accountability rather than mere procedural legality. Third, the manuscript provides a detailed enumeration of assets: *“batang kabung, batang buluh, batang duku, batang rambutan, batang petai, batang durian, dan lain-lain batang juga yang di dalam watas kebun”*. The repeated use of *batang* indicates that the transaction concerns productive resources rather than land ownership. Fourth, economic value is explicitly stated: *“dengan harga 150 gulden rupiah kontan”*, signaling the integration of local trade into a wider colonial monetary system. Finally, social validation is reinforced through collective acknowledgment: *“ini serta dengan saksi adanya”*, confirming that witnesses played a crucial role in legitimizing the transaction.

Implications for English Language Learning

This study outlines implications for English language learning based on linguistic analysis of a nineteenth-century Bangka legal manuscript, supported by contextual interviews with the manuscript owner. It does not propose classroom interventions; it offers a conceptual account of how historical legal discourse informs discourse awareness, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), intercultural communicative competence (ICC), and critical language awareness. The analysis draws on historical hermeneutics, which views texts as socially situated meaning across time (Ricoeur, 1991), and ESP genre theory, which explains how

professional texts realize institutional purposes through conventionalized structures (Bhatia, 2014). These frameworks position the manuscript as a resource for examining legal register, genre moves, and culturally grounded constructions of authority.

Historical Legal Manuscripts as Authentic Language Data

English language learning, particularly in EFL contexts, relies heavily on contemporary texts produced in Anglophone settings. While these materials are pedagogically accessible, they often present institutional language as culturally neutral and ahistorical (Schenker, 2024). This limitation is especially evident in Legal English instruction, where learners are typically exposed to modern contracts and policy documents rooted in Western legal systems. As a result, learners may overlook how institutional discourse is shaped by local culture, history, and social values. Moreover, authenticity in language education is frequently defined narrowly as texts produced by native speakers for present-day communication, excluding historical and translated texts (Giusteri, 2025).

The Bangka manuscript (see Figure 1 and Table 1) contains performative legal expressions such as *"mengaku dengan sesungguhnya jual"* (hereby truthfully declare the sale), followed by precise identification of the parties and assets, including *"batang durian, batang rambutan, batang buluh"*, and a fixed price (*150 gulden rupiah kontan*). Interview data reinforce the authenticity of the text. The manuscript owner stated *"This document was used as legitimate proof of sale. People trusted it because the writing was clear and witnesses were included."* These data indicate that the manuscript functioned as an authentic legal document within its community. Its language was practical and authoritative, designed to regulate real economic relations rather than to convey symbolic or literary meaning. Although the text is historical and translated, it reflects genuine social practice and institutional authority.

Developing Discourse Awareness through Legal Text Structure

A persistent challenge in English language learning is learners' limited awareness of texts as organized discourse rather than collections of sentences. This challenge is particularly evident in legal genres, which learners often perceive as repetitive and stylistically rigid (Bhatia et al., 2021). Without discourse awareness, repetition may be misinterpreted as redundancy, hindering learners' ability to understand genre-specific communicative strategies. The manuscript (see Figure 1 and Table 1) demonstrates a fixed legal structure: identification of the seller, declaration of sale, enumeration of assets, statement of price, transfer of rights, and confirmation by witnesses. Lexical repetition is prominent, particularly the repeated use of *batang* before each item. The manuscript owner explained in the interview: *"If it is not repeated, misunderstandings can happen. That is why each item must be stated one by one."* The structure and repetition function as deliberate strategies to ensure clarity and prevent legal dispute. Repetition operates as a mechanism of precision rather than stylistic weakness, reflecting genre conventions in legal discourse.

Insights for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Legal English

ESP and Legal English instruction often focus on specialized vocabulary and procedural knowledge, such as legal terms, document formats, and professional conventions. While these elements are important, such an approach risks presenting legal language as a purely technical register detached from social and cultural context. This narrow focus may limit learners' ability to understand how legal authority, legitimacy, and trust are constructed through language in real-world settings (Pentón Herrera & Becker, 2025). Another issue is that Legal English materials typically reflect Western legal systems, leaving learners unprepared to engage with legal discourse in culturally diverse environments. In increasingly globalized professional contexts, legal communication often involves cross-cultural interaction, where assumptions about authority and legitimacy may differ. Addressing this challenge requires exposing learners to legal discourse as a culturally embedded practice rather than a universal technical code. The manuscript (see Figure 1 and Table 1) includes witnesses (*"serta dengan saksi adanya"*) and honorific titles such as *Haji*. Interview data highlight the social role of these features: *"Witnesses are important so everyone knows and no one can deny it later."* Legal authority

in the manuscript is constructed through both textual form and social recognition. The document functions as a legal and social instrument.

Intercultural Communicative Competence and Critical Language Awareness

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and critical language awareness are increasingly recognized as core goals of English language education. However, learners often encounter these concepts in abstract terms, without concrete textual examples that illustrate how language reflects cultural values and power relations (Vu, 2022). This gap makes it difficult for learners to critically engage with institutional texts or to recognize how language participates in shaping social order. Another challenge is that learners may view English as culturally neutral, especially when learning it primarily through standardized textbooks. This perception can obscure the ideological and cultural dimensions of language use. To develop ICC and critical language awareness, learners need exposure to texts that clearly demonstrate how language is embedded in cultural, religious, and political contexts. The manuscript (see Figure 1 and Table 1) employs Islamic dating (*9 hari bulan Rabiul Akhir tahun 1297*) and religious honorifics. The interview confirms their significance, “Islamic dates and titles signaled honesty and responsibility to the community.” These features show that legal discourse reflects cultural and religious values, shaping how authority and morality are understood.

Discussion

This section interprets the findings by situating the Bangka manuscript within historical hermeneutics and legal discourse studies, and by clarifying what its linguistic features reveal about law, economy, and culture in nineteenth-century Bangka. The manuscript indicates that legal writing operated as a socially recognized act, in which conventional language and communal endorsement transformed private agreement into an authoritative record. Ricoeur’s historical-hermeneutic view treats texts as forms of situated social action rather than neutral repositories of information (Ricoeur, 1991). In this manuscript, legal force is produced through shared conventions that mediate intention into institutional practice. Formulaic framing, explicit dating and location, formal self-identification, and a witnessing closure, signals genre recognition and procedural legitimacy. This supports legal discourse scholarship showing that validity is sustained through institutionally sanctioned patterns of wording and structure, not merely through propositional content (Bhatia et al., 2021; Heffer et al., 2020; Tiersma & Solan, 2022). The performative dimension reinforces this point: declarations that “sell” and “transfer rights” function as speech acts that enact the transaction, constituting the agreement as a legal fact (Coulthard et al., 2020).

The manuscript also exhibits a strong orientation toward referential precision. Repetition of *batang* and the detailed enumeration of tree types delimit the object of exchange and constrain interpretive ambiguity. This aligns with research on legal drafting that emphasizes specificity as a mechanism for legal certainty and dispute prevention (Gales, 2021; Šarčević, 2023). In Ricoeurian terms, the text is structured to preserve authoritative meaning beyond the immediate interaction, enabling the document to remain interpretable and enforceable across time (Ricoeur, 1991). The use of colonial currency further indicates an intersection between local legal practice and broader economic systems, demonstrating how legal discourse accommodates historical change while remaining grounded in local norms (Maftuhin, 2023; Heffer et al., 2020). The socio-cultural layer of the text points to a moral economy embedded in social identity and communal accountability. Lineage markers anchor personhood and responsibility, while truth claims and witness presence locate legality within social trust rather than written authority alone. Such features support scholarship that conceptualizes legal and economic practices as culturally and morally situated, where legitimacy is reinforced through collective recognition and ethical norms (Maftuhin, 2023; Siregar & Yahaya, 2023). The focus on productive trees also reflects an agrarian logic in which ownership is defined through productivity and long-term use. Religious honorifics and Islamic dating index normative horizons that frame economic action within culturally specific regimes of legitimacy (Berikashvili, 2025; Crowther, 2022).

The findings also carry implications for applied linguistics. From an ESP and genre perspective, the manuscript constitutes professional legal discourse organized to fulfil

institutional purposes (Bhatia, 2014). Its formulaic structuring, repetition, and explicitness exemplify genre features that support genre awareness, discourse analysis, and critical literacy in advanced academic and professional communication (Bhatia et al., 2021; Gales, 2021). Engagement with historically and culturally diverse legal texts further contributes to intercultural communicative competence and critical language awareness by foregrounding how authority and power are constructed through discourse (Doerr, 2023; Giusteri, 2025; Patterson, 2023; Schenker, 2024; Vu, 2022). The Bangka manuscript therefore extends the scope of authentic materials beyond contemporary Anglophone genres and offers a historically grounded resource for discourse-based instruction.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to address the limited attention given to historical legal manuscripts from peripheral regions in English-language scholarship by examining a nineteenth-century Bangka legal manuscript documenting a local trade transaction. The main objective was to analyze the legal discourse and cultural meanings embedded in the manuscript and to identify its potential contributions to English language learning, particularly as a source of authentic discourse. The findings reveal that the manuscript demonstrates clear characteristics of legal discourse, including the use of formulaic expressions, performative declarations, and repetitive listing of property to ensure legal certainty. The absence of an explicit numerical price, replaced instead by a conventional statement indicating that a price had been agreed upon, reflects culturally grounded legal practices in which authority and legitimacy were established through language, witnesses, and social norms rather than through detailed monetary records. These features confirm that legal language in the manuscript operates not merely as a technical instrument but as a social and cultural practice shaped by local traditions and Islamic legal concepts. The implications of this study are twofold. From a historical and cultural perspective, it highlights the value of local legal manuscripts as sources for understanding indigenous legal reasoning and socio-cultural norms. From an educational perspective, the findings suggest that such texts can serve as authentic materials in English language learning, fostering students' discourse awareness, intercultural understanding, and critical reading skills by exposing them to non-Western legal traditions and historically situated forms of meaning-making. Despite these contributions, several limitations should be noted. The analysis draws on a single manuscript from a specific time and place, and its findings are therefore historically specific and not readily generalizable to other Malay legal traditions or regions. The contextual interpretation relies on a limited set of interviews with one key informant, and portions of the manuscript are partially illegible, requiring cautious reconstruction and interpretive restraint. In addition, the study proposes pedagogical relevance conceptually but does not include classroom-based implementation or learning outcome measurement. Future research should extend this work by analyzing a broader corpus of Malay and Southeast Asian legal manuscripts across regions and periods to enable comparative discourse analysis of genre structure, performativity, and legitimation strategies. Further studies should also examine parallel documents (e.g., land sales, inheritance deeds, debt agreements) to map variation within legal subgenres. Finally, classroom-oriented research is recommended to operationalize the manuscript as instructional material through lesson design, pilot teaching, and evaluation of learning outcomes, including discourse awareness, intercultural competence, and critical literacy in English language education.

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