



## A critical discourse analysis of otherization in Iran's family court: A gender-based study

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### Abstract

This study investigates the phenomenon of 'otherization' within family court discourse, highlighting how language shapes power dynamics and perceptions in legal settings. Drawing on data collected from 26 family court cases in Doroud city, the research employs Van Dijk's (2008, 1997) ideological square to examine linguistic and meta-linguistic strategies used by participants to assert dominance, persuade judges, and marginalize opposing parties. These strategies align closely with the ideological square, which emphasizes the systematic construction of in-group superiority and out-group negativity. The interplay between linguistic and meta-linguistic elements illustrates the ideological layering within family court discourse, where strategies like interruption and overlapping talk not only reflect personal beliefs but also reinforce power structures and gendered representations. Ultimately, the study highlights that otherization is not merely a rhetorical strategy but a deeply embedded mechanism for achieving ideological dominance in contested discourse, like discourse in family court. This reinforces the need for critical awareness of how language perpetuates power imbalances, urging practitioners and scholars to uncover and address these hidden layers of discourse. The findings reveal that both male and female participants utilize otherization strategies, albeit in gender-specific ways. Women often assert dominance through interruptions and distancing pronouns like 's/he', while men foster collective identities using inclusive pronouns such as 'we'. Both genders leverage positive and negative vocabulary, imperatives, and swearing to reinforce in-group superiority and out-group inferiority. These patterns illustrate how language functions as a tool for ideological positioning and power negotiation within legal settings.

**Keywords:** CDA, family court discourse, forensic linguistics, ideology, ideological square, linguistic strategies, meta-linguistic strategies, otherization

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## 1. Introduction

Family court proceedings offer a unique discursive space where power dynamics, institutional ideologies, and individual narratives intersect. Within this setting, discourse is not only a vehicle for conveying legal arguments but also a powerful tool for shaping perceptions of the individuals involved in marital contentious matters. This research aims to undertake a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of family court proceedings, examining how linguistic and meta-linguistic tools shape and reflect underlying ideologies and the mechanisms of otherization. Otherization refers to the process of constructing the other by emphasizing perceived differences, often in ways that dehumanize or marginalize them, reinforcing the superiority of the self or in-group (Said, 1978). The ideological square proposed by Van Dijk (1998, 2000, 2008) provides a systematic approach to understanding how these processes are linguistically and rhetorically reinforced. It is a framework for identifying and analyzing the othering representation of groups or individuals within discourse. The ideological square posits that discourse often emphasizes positive self-representation and negative other-representation. In the context of family court, this manifests in the portrayal of one party as 'responsible' or 'fit' and the other as 'negligent' or 'unfit' by legal representatives, social workers, and even the parties themselves. Such representations serve as vehicles of power and control, reinforcing or challenging prevailing social ideologies about family roles, parenting competence, and morality. This research employs both linguistic and meta-linguistic tools to analyze how these ideological constructions occur within family court discourse. By examining these tools, the study uncovers how participants (petitioner, respondent, etc.) negotiate their identities, and how they may inadvertently or intentionally reinforce particular stereotypes or ideological biases. Through this analysis, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how institutional ideologies are reproduced and contested in family court settings. It also aims to shed light on the broader implications of such discursive practices for social perceptions of family, gender, and power in legal and institutional contexts. Ultimately, this work aspires to illuminate the subtle yet significant ways that language both reflects and reinforces power structures within family court discourse. The data for the present study were collected from 26 cases in the family court of Doroud city, Lorestan, Iran. Therefore, in this study, we aimed to address the

following two questions:

- 1) How are ideological biases reflected and reinforced in family court discourse through the use of linguistic and meta-linguistic tools, using van Dijk's ideological square?
- 2) What specific linguistic and meta-linguistic tools do participants in family court proceedings use to reflect their ideologies and assert dominance?

Among the studies most closely related to the current research topic, we can mention Hallajzadeh et al. (2018a, b) and Khalifehloo et al (2020). The primary focus of the studies cited has been on examining language tools in ideological discourse. In recent studies examining discourse in Iranian family courts, various linguistic strategies have been analyzed to understand how participants, particularly men and women seeking divorce, use language to influence judicial outcomes. Hallajzadeh et al. (2018a) focused on the ideological structures embedded in the discourse of men seeking deference in family courts, utilizing Van Dijk's (2006) ideological square. This study examined the discourse of 20 men, aged 25-45, in urban family courts in Birjand, revealing that the men predominantly utilized strategies to amplify negative perceptions of their wives (58 %) and highlight their own positive qualities (27%). The other dimensions of the ideological square, that is, downplaying their own negative traits and minimizing the positive aspects of their wives, were used less frequently. These results reinforce Van Dijk's theory that language serves to achieve ideological reinforcement, particularly in a legal context. In a complementary study, Hallajzadeh et al. (2018b) turned their focus to the discourse of women demanding divorce in Iranian family courts. Using Van Dijk's Discourse-Knowledge-Society theory, the researchers analyzed linguistic strategies employed by 20 women in Zahedan, emphasizing how they magnified their positive traits while highlighting their husbands' negative behaviors. Their findings showed that the women primarily used rhetorical and syntactic strategies such as, euphemism, actor descriptions, and polarization to portray their husbands negatively while minimizing their own faults. These strategies reflect Van Dijk's framework for persuading audiences through ideological discourse. Similarly, Khalifehloo et al. (2020) investigated how divorce-seeking women in Zahedan used language to reproduce social power and control ideologies within family court settings. This

study applied both Van Dijk's (2006) goal analysis theory and Van Leeuwen's (2008) framework for actor representation to examine discourse structures in 20 family court sessions. The study identified three key strategies: relational identification, passivation, and the mitigation of others' negative traits while magnifying their own positive attributes. These findings suggested that language use in such settings is a powerful tool for reflecting and reinforcing social power dynamics and ideological attitudes, particularly in contentious legal contexts like divorce proceedings. Together, these studies underscored how ideological constructs are embedded in discourse and how strategic use of language can influence legal decisions, demonstrating the intersection of language, power, and ideology in the family court system. In our present study, alongside linguistic tools, we have incorporated meta-linguistic tools into the data analysis.

## 2. Court discourse

A court is a place where defendants and plaintiffs put forward their different arguments, witnesses give testimony about what they have seen, and judges render judgments after reviewing evidence from different sources. 'Justice' is the primary focus of every decision made at this institution. According to Finnegan (2012), the courtroom serves as a platform where differing narratives about criminal and civil trials are presented, allowing judges to determine the facts of a case and make a decision. Van Dijk (1997) introduces court discourse as a sub-genre of discourse that is used in the process of discovering the truth and making decisions about cases that individuals or groups take to court for legal resolution. The said discourse involves both verbal and nonverbal behaviors and interactions that take place between legal and lay participants during the process of investigation/trial. The present study introduces the discourse of the court as a way by which we produce, understand, and reflect the facts in a legal system. As a result, all the interactions between the parties and their intentions can be introduced under the title of 'court discourse'. In fact, what causes the formation of the legal context is the discourse actions that take place between the plaintiffs, complainants, witnesses, judges, etc. as participants. Discourse actions are defined as the production, distribution, and consumption of non/ linguistic constructions (Bresska, 2021). In this definition, discourse actions are defined based on pragmatic approaches (Austin, 1962) and

critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1993; Janks, 1997; Van Dijk, 2008), according to which language is seen as a component of society, comprised of social interactions and closely linked to individuals' identities. Therefore, in general, in critical approaches to language analysis, attention is paid to what actions people do with their language and also what needs the use of language convinces people because language is not neutral but holds ideological biases in different contexts. Discourse both shapes and is shaped by environments in which ideology serves as the guiding force (Van Dijk, 2008). The power relations between the discourse participants and the discourse strategies they use to interact with each other in a specific context are determined by ideology (Wagner & Chen, 2011). From this point of view, discourse strategies can be considered as plans that more or less people deliberately design to achieve specific goals (Blackledge, 2005). The types of actions and discourse strategies that are used in a communication context appear in the form of various linguistic tools. Linguistic devices are utilized to carry out the discursive practices and strategies in a communicative setting, specifically within a courtroom context. Using language in various ways allows for the expression of social, cultural, and psychological aspects that shape a context (Kwon et al, 2013). The vocabulary, grammatical structures, and rhetorical devices are the linguistic tools that have their own categories and subcategories, which should be explored. These tools are utilized by individuals to value, negate, and accuse other people.

### 3. Critical discourse analysis and ideological square

Van Dijk (1997, 2008, 2006) defines discourse as a form of social practice that is both shaped by and shapes society. His work integrates insights from cognitive psychology and sociolinguistics, emphasizing the relationship between discourse, cognition, and society. He explains that discourse is both a product and a medium of social interaction, where language is used to construct meaning, express ideologies, and perform social actions. He thus situates discourse within a complex interplay of language, thought, and social structures, underscoring its linguistic form but expanding its implications through social and cognitive dimensions. Discourse encompasses spoken or written communicative events, including their structures, functions, and social contexts. It is not just language but a complex phenomenon that involves power, ideology, and interaction within social settings. To put it more

precisely, it is a means through which social and political ideologies are produced and reproduced (Van Dijk, 1997). Van Dijk's (2006) socio-cognitive approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA) examines how mental representations and cognitive structures underlie and influence discourse. Van Dijk (1983, 2000, 2008) posits that ideologies in discourse tend to focus on four discursive strategies. The first strategy is to emphasize positive information about the in-group; language often highlights the virtues, achievements, and moral superiority of the group the speaker belongs to or supports. Positive self-presentation is common, using favorable adjectives, success stories, or claims of benevolent actions. The second strategy is to emphasize negative points of the out-group; discourse emphasizes the negative aspects of the out-group, often portraying them as a threat, morally inferior, or dangerous. This can include highlighting failures, violence, or unethical actions associated with the out-group. The third strategy is to mitigate negative aspects regarding the in-group; when negative information arises about the in-group, strategies are used to downplay or justify the actions. This could be through euphemism, denial, or attributing such actions to external causes beyond the group's control. The fourth strategy is to mitigate positive information about the out-group; if there is positive information about the out-group, it tends to be minimized or dismissed as irrelevant or exceptional. These four strategies combined create a powerful means of otherization of in-group and out-group relations through discourse. The emphasis on positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation shapes public perception and constructs social divisions. Participants employ various linguistic and meta-linguistic techniques to advance the suggested ideological strategies. After examining the data, the researchers classified the tools utilized by the clients into linguistic and meta-linguistic categories. The following will offer explanations for each one.

### **3.1. Linguistics tools**

Linguistic tools that are mainly used by interlocutors in creating discourses include lexical choice, local semantic and grammatical structures. Word choices can impact the perception of actions, events, and individuals, frequently shaping them to align with specific legal goals. Cotterill's (2003) delves into these dynamics, highlighting the use of language for persuasion and manipulation in legal settings. Cotterill analyzed how the words used in questioning witnesses and delivering

closing statements can shape the story to either blame or clear people, ultimately influencing trial results. Considering grammatical structures, in the current study, we mainly focused on two types of grammatical constructions, namely, negative constructions and constructions containing obligation modals (deontic modality). In discourse analysis, negative sentences can subtly express disagreement, criticism, or separation from specific ideas or groups, making them especially effective in shaping ideology. By forming negative statements about the traits or behaviors of the out-group (e.g., 'They do not adhere to our values'), speakers can portray the out-group unfavorably without explicitly saying so, a method commonly known as 'negative other-presentation' (van Dijk, 2006). Fairclough (2003) highlights that modality can reflect power relations by indicating who has the authority to enforce obligations. This is especially relevant in institutional discourse, where terms like 'must' indicate directives from a higher authority, implicitly marking boundaries of acceptable behavior or reinforcing institutional norms (Fairclough, 2003). Similarly, Van Dijk (1993) points out that deontic modal verbs can reveal ideological stances by setting normative standards for in-group and out-group behavior, contributing to otherization or marginalization in discourse.

### **3.2. Meta-linguistic tools**

Metalinguistic tools refer to linguistic elements or resources employed by speakers or writers to discuss or clarify language itself. The primary function of these devices is to aid communication by providing directions on the correct understanding, interpretation, or use of words and expressions in a given context. They might convey the speaker's attitude regarding language, its usage, or its meaning. Verschueren (1999) points to the necessity of metalinguistic devices as a gateway to 'discourse' which refers to the language used to organize, comment on, or modify the message, helping both speakers and receiver to navigate the discourse. Among the meta-linguistic tools, we can refer to self-representation, interruption and overlapping talk (henceforth, OT). Self-representation in ideological stance-taking involves constructing the out-group as an opposing party to the in-group, often by highlighting differences in values, actions, or beliefs. This process, known as 'othering,' is a way of creating ideological boundaries that separate the self or in-group from those who are viewed as ideologically opposing (Du Bois, 2007). Pronouns are very crucial in self-representation, particularly in ideological

discourse. The use of pronouns like 'we' and 'our' creates a sense of shared identity and implies unity with the in-group. Similarly, distancing pronouns like 'they' help reinforce ideological boundaries between groups (Johnstone, 2009).

Additionally, interruptions cannot be viewed as simply a disturbance in the flow of speech; instead, they are strategic moves that speakers can use to assert control, challenge authority, or direct the trajectory of conversation. Interruption can serve multiple purposes, such as establishing dominance and control (Tannen, 1984), undermining the opposing viewpoint (Kendon, 1990), signaling disagreement or opposition (Fairclough, 2003), negotiating group identity and solidarity (Lerner, 1996), and resisting dominant ideologies (Bell, 2011). OT or simultaneous speech is a common feature of spontaneous, mundane conversation and is a key area of focus within discourse analysis. This phenomenon can serve multiple functions, from signaling enthusiasm and engagement to indicating interruption or competition for the conversational floor. OT is often analyzed in terms of its role in managing turn-taking. According to Sacks et al. (1984), turn-taking in conversation generally follows rules that allow speakers to alternate smoothly. Overlaps may occur when participants misinterpret cues or when both attempt to claim the next turn. In the discourse of the court, OT is of a disruptive type. Disruptive overlaps may signal interruption or competition, as speakers vie for the conversational floor. Tannen (1984) notes that cultural norms often determine whether overlaps are perceived as cooperative or confrontational. The social context and relationship between speakers can affect how overlaps are interpreted. In institutional discourse, such as, courtrooms or interviews, OT may be strictly controlled, reflecting power relations (Heritage & Greatbatch, 1991). Overlaps in these settings are often managed carefully, as they can impact credibility and authority. In the upcoming section, we will explore the linguistic and meta-linguistic tools utilized by individuals in the family court under study to communicate their ideologies.

#### **4. Methodology and Data Collection**

In this research, we analyzed the data with a descriptive-analytical approach. The current article is part of a study that examines court discourse in three settings of criminal, family, and civil within the court and prosecutor's office of Doroud city. A total of 33,024 words were gathered from the family court between

February 20, 2023, and June 10, 2023. These words were tagged using Python software (Version 3.10.11) according to specific criteria such as the context (family, civil, and criminal courts), the type of participants and their gender, the number of interruptions and turn-takings, etc. Example (1) shows part of the tagging:

```
(1) </utterance>
-<utterance cid='3' uid='89'>
<sent qc='5' sid='1'>xodeš goft?</sent>
</utterance>
-<utterance cid='1' uid='90'>
<sent sid='1'>bale, daqiqan yadam hast. </sent>
```

In Example (1), it is evident that every time a participant speaks, it is referred to as 'an utterance' and may vary in length in terms of sentences or words. Table 1 also presents general data information.

**Table 1.**  
*Words produced by participants in the family court.*

Court	Total number of cases	Number of utterances			Number of words		
		Woman	Man	Other participants	Woman	Man	Other participants
Family	26	806	568	1081	11659	10424	20431
		2455			33024		

Since the present study specifically deals with the analysis of the discourse of the petitioner and respondent participants (more precisely, men and women), the words produced by other interlocutors, such as judges and lawyers, were excluded from the total data. According to the data, the number of words produced by men is 10,424, and the number of words produced by women is 11,659. In the current research, two general titles of 'man' and 'woman' are used to refer to the spouses, so these two words refer to the spouses who filed for divorce in the court. It is worth mentioning that to protect the privacy of individuals, all information, such as name and surname, names of specific places, and any information that determines the

identity of individuals, has been changed and is included in the text in an abbreviated form.

## 5. Findings and discussion

In this part, we will present the linguistic and meta-linguistic strategies utilized by participants in the family court under study to attain their objectives. Linguistic tactics involved lexical choice, local semantic and grammatical structures, and swearing. Meta-linguistic tactics were composed of self-representation, interruption, and OT. Below is the explanation of these two kinds of tactics in detail.

### 5.1. Linguistic tools

Lexical choice can be considered a way to convey ideologies. During family court proceedings, every speaker seeks to manipulate the court discourse in their favor by using language. In the present study, words with ideological connotations were grouped into two main categories: negative and positive. One of the strategies to emphasize the positive points of oneself (inside groups) was the use of words with a positive value. On the other hand, the use of words with a negative value was a strategy to emphasize the negative points of others (non-self groups). As demonstrated in Figure (1), women used a total of 365 words with positive and negative connotations, with 74.3% focusing on highlighting the negative traits of their husbands (non-insiders) and 25.7% emphasizing their own positive qualities and insiders. Additionally, a sum of 234 words expressing positive and negative meanings was found in men's speech, with 61.2% directed towards criticizing their partners (and others) and 38.8% focusing on praising themselves (and their peers). The following examples show this point clearly.

(2) W: *Išun aslan az bače xodeš xabar nadare, nemidune ke bačaš mixore? Mixabe? Aslan zendast?*

This man does not know about his own child at all; he does not know that his child eats, sleeps, wears, and is alive at all.

(3) M: *Modam ba dustaš vaqt migzarune, mast mikone, in xanum dare ba aberuye man bazi mikone.*

She spends time with her friends, gets drunk; this lady is damaging my reputation.

In the case presented in (2), the woman highlights her husband's lack of concern for their child as a way to illustrate his negative qualities, not caring for the child's basic needs, such as food, clothing, etc. Additionally, in Example (3), the man mentions traits of his wife's behavior that go against societal norms, like socializing with friends and getting drunk in an attempt to portray his wife in a negative light. Additionally, he explicitly mentions that his wife's actions would damage his reputation.

Moreover, the analysis revealed that the majority of the words identified as negative hold legal significance, suggesting that both sides have some understanding of legal principles, either through prior knowledge or legal advice before their court appearance. For example, most of the men used the word "adam-e tamkin/ non-compliance"<sup>1</sup> to refer to the negative points of their wives. Non-compliance is a situation that can arise in a family court, carrying legal consequences that may impact the case proceedings. Example (4) is a case in point:

(4) M: *In xanum aslan našeze ast, tamkin nemikone, malume in zendegi ro nemixad.* This lady is Nashzeh<sup>2</sup>. She doesn't comply with me; obviously she doesn't want this [family] life.

Additionally, in cases like (5), women bring up terms like addiction or failure to pay 'alimony'<sup>3</sup> or expenses, which are seen as grounds upon which a man can be charged and sentenced in court for neglecting his responsibilities towards his family.

(5) W: *In aqa etiad dare, xarji nemide, kotakam mizane, hame hamsaye-ha ham šahed hastan.*

This man is an addict; he doesn't pay the alimony and expenses; he beats me; all the neighbors witnessed this.

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1. When the wife refuses to perform the duties assigned to her by the law, the husband is able to file a complaint of non-compliance against the wife.

2. Nashzeh is a term used in Iran's civil law for a woman who disobeys her husband.

3. Alimony, also known as aliment, maintenance, spousal support, and spouse maintenance, is a legal responsibility for one individual to provide financial assistance to their spouse either during or after marital separation or divorce.

Each party in court not only employs negative words or phrases but also utilizes positive words to persuade the judge. Indeed, employing positive language highlights the parties' entitlement to support, allowing them to demonstrate their righteousness through this method. By crafting a positive perception of themselves in the judge's view, they can influence the progression of the case in their favor. For instance, the wife in Example (6) articulates that she has met all her family responsibilities and wants to maintain her marriage, while her husband is the one seeking to destroy their relationship.

(6) W: *Man ba hame-y-e saxti-ha saxtam, zendegim ro dust daram, man zir-e ĉador ham ba in aqa zendegi mikonam.*

I made it with all the difficulties. I love my life; I can live under a tent (any circumstances) with this man.

Men primarily use lexical items that show they have financially supported their partner and children, as shown in Example (7). Analysis shows that 51% of positive words that men use to describe themselves are connected to the financial situation of their family. Indeed, discussing the financial support of the family from the perspective of men is a tactic that may cultivate a favorable impression on the judge.

(7) M: *Man ruzi do shift kar mikonam ta xanevadam dar ašayeš bašan.*

I work two shifts in one day to ensure my family is at ease.

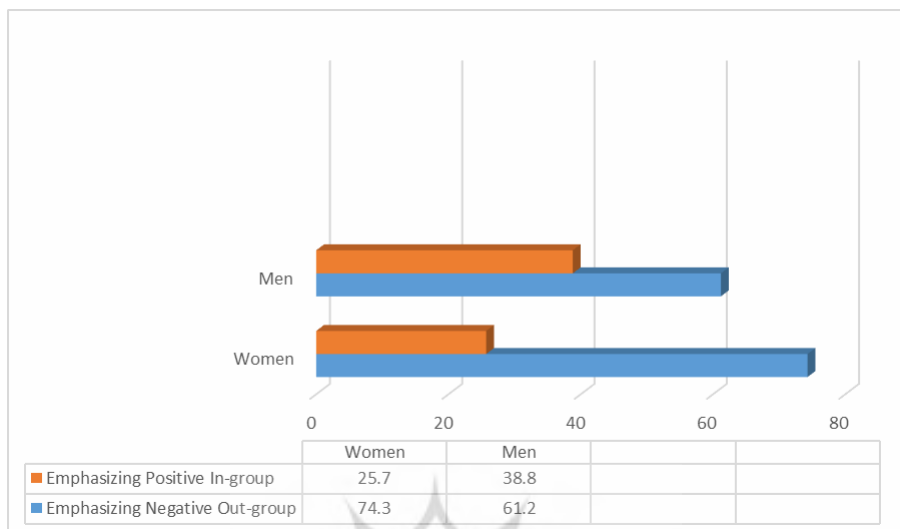
Comparing the use of words by women and men suggests that women not only mention the absence of financial backing from their spouses in their defenses, but also frequently address the absence of emotional support from their husbands. In Example (8), 'attention' means emotional attention, and also the use of the word 'maid' means that the husband neglects the woman's role as a spouse and ignores the lady's emotional needs.

(8) W: *Be man aslan tavajohi nadare, engar man kolfatešam na hamsareš.*

He doesn't pay attention to me at all, as if I were his maid and not his wife.

**Figure 1.**

*The proportion of ideological language in lexical choice*



### 5.1.2. Local semantic structures

Local semantic structures or local meaning refer to the way meanings are constructed at the level of individual sentences, clauses, or even words within a text. Phrases and sentences also contain ideological concepts. In fact, in a sentence, all structures can show a special meaning that can be used at the service of a specific ideology. In other words, in local meaning, we are faced with the processes and mechanisms of meaning control, whereby all the information that ends up with being detrimental to the insider group remains implicit and is therefore marginalized, as well as the information that is unpleasant for the outsider group explicitly expressed and highlighted and vice versa (our negative points and their positive points remain implicit).

(9) W: *Alan panzdah sal ast ezdevaj kardim, hanuz yek ruz baraye man kar nakarde.*

We have been married for 15 years, and he has not paid the cost of living.

(10) W: *Ye mard bayad moškeleš ro xodeš hal kone, man šayad delan naxad kasi befahme tuye zendegim če xabare.*

A man should solve his problem by himself; maybe, I don't want anyone else to know what's going on in my life.

In Examples (9) and (10), respectively, women have produced negative sentences to highlight the drawbacks of men in their roles as husbands and fathers, as dictated by societal standards. In Example (9), it is stated that 'he has not paid the cost of living'. And in Example (10), it is stated that 'a man should solve his problem by himself'. In both examples, there are presuppositions based on which the concept of being a husband is defined. As a result, if the presuppositions are acted against, this suggests that the husband has failed in his duties. Concerning men, it is evident that the sentences most frequently utilized with an ideological significance focused on downplaying their unfavorable traits. In Example (11), the woman indicates that her husband's irrational actions stem from his addiction, and by using the term 'addiction', she essentially shows a distorted image of her husband. Conversely, the husband, to marginalize the negative aspect associated with him, promptly asserts his readiness to undergo an addiction test.

(11) a. W: *aqaye qazi in aslan motade ta'adol-e ravani nadare.*

Your honor, this man is an addict; he has no mental balance.

b. M: *Mige motadam, bande test-e etiad midam.*

He says I am addicted, I will take an addiction test.

Also, findings showed that most of the sentences that men used to de-emphasize their negative points are related to financial issues. That is, a man provides for finances, specifically, a man who supports financially implies that other negative aspects attributed to him are insignificant.

(12) M: *Man az sobh miram sar-e kar, aslan xabar nadaram ta šab barmigardam ta in xanum dar refah base, dige nemidunam či mixad.*

I go to work from the early morning till night, ..... , I don't know at all, so that this lady would be in comfort, I don't know what she wants anymore.

In Example (12), the man states that he dedicates a majority of his time to his work and making money. To put it differently, a man's definition of being a husband focuses solely on ensuring the family's financial security, which leads him to view his wife's objections as unwarranted. At the same time, in women's discussions, besides highlighting the downsides of insufficient financial assistance,

they frequently talk about the absence of emotional (and even sexual) support. In example (13), by enumerating the man's personal concerns (e.g, *he was resting, he was at home, he was attending class, or he was studying*), she subtly indicates that the man was neglecting his marital responsibilities. Furthermore, by using the term 'mother', the woman expresses her disapproval of her husband's actions, which implies that he anticipated her fulfillment of maternal responsibilities.

(13) W: *aqay-e H.E ya xab bud xune ya sar-e kelas bud ya dašt dars mixund, man ham hokm-e madareš ro daštam.*

Mr. H.E was either sleeping at home or in class or studying, I was just like his mother.

The results show that neither side acknowledges the other's positive points, and even if they do mention it implicitly, they tend to downplay them. For instance, in Example (14a), the man highlights earning a salary during his education and early years as an advantage, whereas the woman (14b) seeks to de-emphasize this positive point by noting that her field is medicine, and it is clear that one receives a salary while studying medicine.

(14) a. M: *Man az haman avayel-e zendegim ham hoquq daštam va xarj-e zendegi ro midadan.*

I had a salary from the very beginning of my life and paid for my living expenses.

b. W: *Išun ba qarardadi ke ba sabake behdašt daštand hoquq daryaft mikardand.*

They were paid according to the contract they had with the health center.

In Example (14), the man initially states that his wife possesses positive traits; yet in the subsequent sentences, he downplays his wife's good qualities and juxtaposes them with a less favorable quality (*she completely obeys her parents*), thereby marginalizing the positive aspects of his wife.

(15) M: *Man nemigam in xanum bad ast, in xanum hame čizeš xube faqat hame češm va guseš xanevadaš ast.*

I am not saying that this lady is bad; this lady is all good, but she completely follows her parents' guidance and heeds their advice.

It was also observed that in some cases, women use sentences that can show their positive points and their husband's negative points at the same time. In Example (16), the woman subtly conveys that she has encountered challenging circumstances in her life, focusing on the negative aspects of the other party through the use of words like 'enduring or making', yet despite these challenges, she has persevered in life, highlighting the positive aspects of the protagonist.

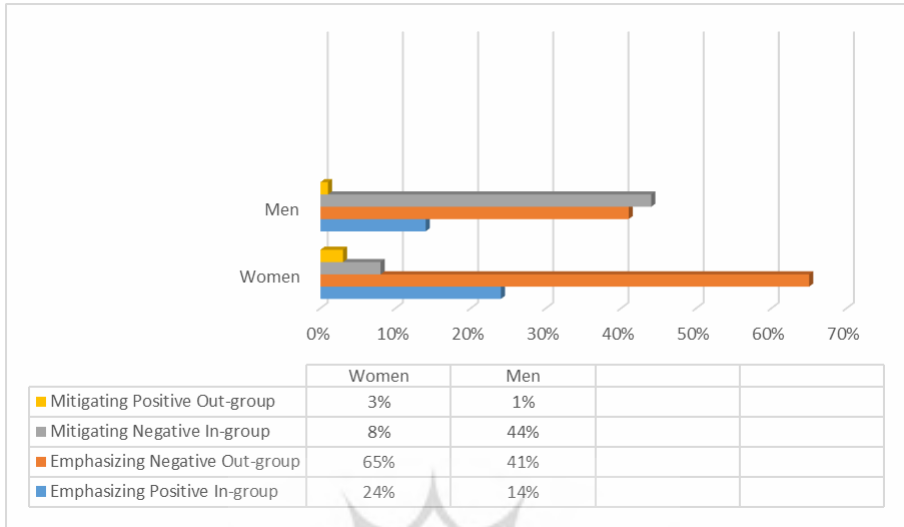
(16) W: *Man ta alaneš ham be xater-e bačam tahamol kardam/ ba šarayet saxt saxtam.*

Until now, I have endured bad circumstances for the sake of my child; I made it in spite of difficult conditions.

As shown in Figure 2, out of a total of 262 ideological sentences, women used 24% to highlight their positive points (and insiders), 65% to emphasize the negative points of the other party, 8% to de-emphasize their own negative points, and 3% to marginalize the positive points of the other party. Men also mainly used 215 ideological constructions in their speech, 14% to emphasize their positive points, 41% to highlight the negative points of their spouses, 44% to de-emphasize their negative points, and 1 % used to marginalize the positive points of their spouses.

**Figure 2.**

*The proportion of ideological language on local semantic structures*



### 5.1.3. Swearing

In the current study, ‘swearing’<sup>1</sup> is viewed as a linguistic construct that individuals aim to utilize for generating various pragmatic impacts by incorporating it into their speeches. From a structural and semantic perspective, swearing encompasses words that convey sacred ideas, religious convictions, or any significant concept. While it can signal various speech acts, its most frequent application, particularly in legal settings, is as evidence of the speaker’s honesty.

(17) a. W: Moqe’I ke daram zarf mišuram miad immune kenaram mige ab va rika kam masraf kon.

When I am washing the dishes, he comes and stays next to me and tells me to use less water and detergents.

b. M: Be qoran qasam doruq mige.

I swear by the Quran, she is lying.

c. be xoda ye kalame az harfaš rast nist.

I swear by the God, she is lying.

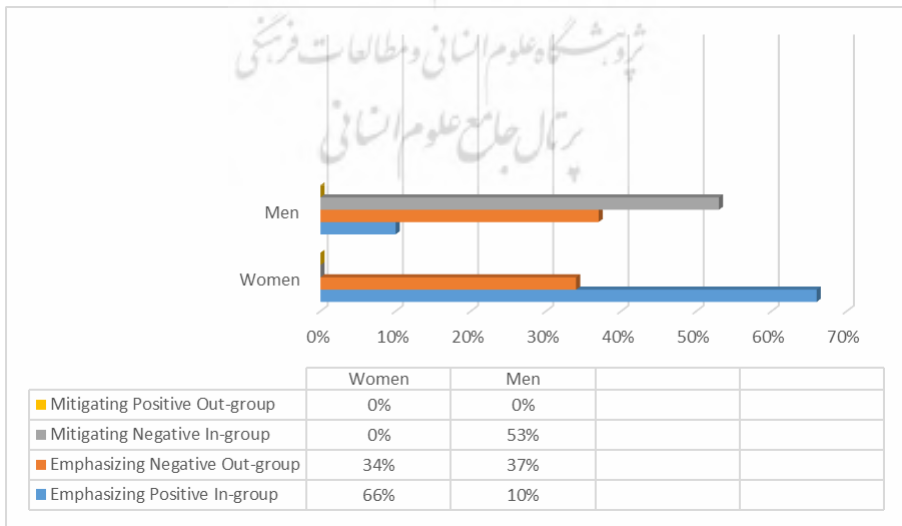
1. For more information on swearing and its role in court discourse see Moradian and Najafi (2024).

In Example (17b), the man blames the woman for being dishonest in order to de-emphasize his bad behavior and uses swearing to make his words seem acceptable. In the same way, in Example (17c), the woman uses swearing to emphasize his husband's bad qualities.

In a family court, each participant attempts to provide a more credible narrative of the occurrences by incorporating swearings in their statements. As a result, when participants attempt to underscore the negative attributes of the opposing side or bring attention to their positive traits, swearing can be viewed as a verbal intensifier that enables individuals to clearly articulate ideological elements in their discourse and enhance their visibility. The analysis of the data revealed that swearing occurred 125 times in the family court under investigation, with women swearing 45 times and men swearing 80 times during conversations. As Figure 3 reveals, women used 66.6% of swear words as a tactic to emphasize their own good qualities, and 33.3% of it to emphasize the negative traits of their husbands. On the other hand, men used it 52.5% to de-emphasize their negative points, 37.5% of it to highlight the other party's negative points, and in 10% of cases, it was to highlight their positive points.

**Figure 3.**

*The proportion of ideological language on swear words*



#### 5.1.4. Grammatical structures

Negative statements frequently function to differentiate the in-group from the out-group by defining what ‘we are not’ or ‘they are not,’ thereby contributing to a narrative of contrast or divergence. In examples like (18), negative verbs (such as, not paying attention) are often used to highlight the flaws, failures, or transgressions of the out-group. This creates the out-group as deficient in morals, respect, or other valued qualities, which serves to perpetuate stereotypes or rationalize exclusionary beliefs.

(18) W: To aslan dar qeid va band-e zendegi nisti.

You do not pay attention to our family life at all.

Negative verbs can be used to showcase the in-group’s moral superiority or restraint. This aligns with emphasizing the in-group’s virtuous behavior, contrasting with the alleged negativity of the out-group, as demonstrated in Example (19).

(19) W: Ma mesle šoma nistim ke aberu vasamun mohem nabaše.

We are not like you who do not care about our reputation.

Negative verbs can also minimize or reject the in-group’s responsibility or imperfections. This helps maintain the in-group’s favorable self-perception by portraying negative behaviors as unintentional, warranted, or nonexistent. In Example (20), the woman has filed for divorce; to push this negative action to the edge, she states that she did not intend to ruin the marriage. In fact, it is her husband who was constantly talking about separation.

(20) W: Man nemixastam zendegim az ham bepaše, xodeš hamaš harfe jodaei mizad.

I didn’t want my life to fall apart; he was talking about separation.

In Example (21), the negative verb ‘cannot/nemitune’ can obscure or deny the man’s positive contribution which is his ‘working’. This negates any recognition of the out-group’s competence or value, bolstering the in-group’s perceived superiority.

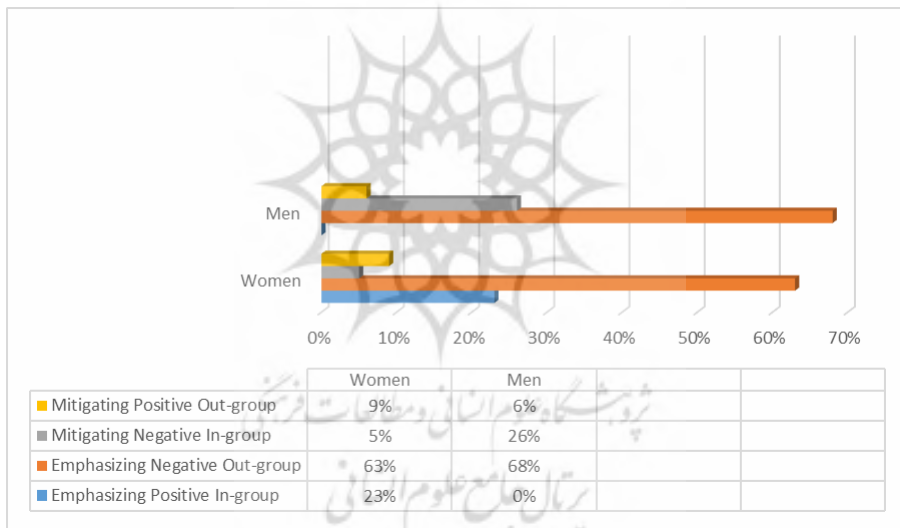
(21) W: Intor ke in aqa kar mikone nemitune az pas-e xarj-e man-o bačam bar biad.

The way this man works, cannot afford me and my child.

The data indicates that women employed 547 negative verbs, while men used 362 negative verbs in their speech. As pointed out in Figure 4, women utilize negative verbs in 63% of the cases to highlight the other party's negative aspects, in 23% of cases to accentuate their own positive aspects, in 9% of cases to downplay the other party's positive aspects, and in 5% of cases to downplay the negative aspects of themselves. In addition, men utilized negative verbs predominantly in 68% of the cases to bring attention to the shortcomings of the other individual, in 26% of the cases to de-emphasize their own negative aspects, and in 6% of the cases to minimize the positive aspects of the other individual.

**Figure 4.**

*The proportion of ideological language used by participants based on negative verbs*



Deontic modality of obligation, particularly expressed through terms like 'must', plays a key role in conveying obligations, rules, or prescriptions within court discourse. This use of 'must' reflects a speaker's attempt to impose authority, express necessity, or direct action, all of which are central in analyzing power relations, social control, and ideologies in texts. In Example (22), 'must' is used by the husband to emphasize the in-group's obligation to maintain its positive identity to keep family life for the sake of his child, aligning with the first strategy of the ideological square. It portrays the in-group as moral and dutiful.

(22) M: Man beheš goftam ye qadam to ye qadam man, ma bayad har tor šode bexater-e bače edame bedim.

I told her, both of us should back down. We have to continue anyway for the sake of our child.

By expressing sentences like (23) the husband imposes an external obligation on his wife, emphasizing their need to conform. It reflects the second strategy, highlighting his wife's presumed deficits or failures as a member of the out group.

(23) M: *In xanom bayad kutah biad, dast az in raftarhaye zešteš bardare, bayad bargarde sare zendegiš.*

This lady must stop her ugly behavior; she should get back to her life.

(24) M: *Qabul daram, mard bayad be ehsasat-e zaneš tavajoh kone, vali xodeš aslan ba man harf nemizane.*

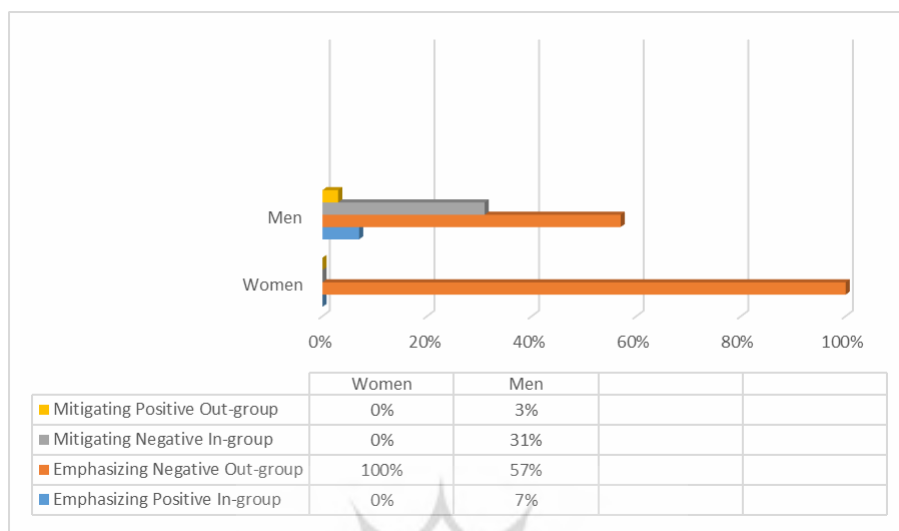
I agree that a man must pay attention to his wife's feelings, but she doesn't talk to me at all.

Example (24) includes an impersonal pronoun with the modal 'must'. This impersonal use of 'must' can de-emphasize responsibility by obscuring agency, aligning with the third strategy. For instance, it can be used to minimize the in-group's culpability in problematic situations. In Example (25), 'must' helps normalize ideological stances by framing them as necessary actions for the collective good. In fact, the man says he does not oppose the woman working, which he sees as a good thing, but he emphasized that her job should align with his values. This aligns with de-emphasizing positive attributes of the out-group by suggesting their potential for harm or threat.

(25) M: *Kar kardan-e in xanom bayad juri baše ke be heisiat man latme nazane.*

This woman's work must not harm my dignity.

The findings indicate that women utilized the word 'must' in just five sentences, which conveyed the downsides of the opposite party in some way. In contrast, men utilized the verbs 'must and must not' a total of 83 times, with 57% highlighting their spouses' negative aspects, 31% de-emphasizing their negative points, 7% emphasizing their positive points, and 3% de-emphasizing the positive points of their wives.

**Figure 5.***The proportion of ideological language on obligation modality*

## 5.2. Metalinguistics tools

Metalinguistic tools are part of the broader concept of discourse strategies used to manage communication effectively, especially in terms of clarifying, modifying, or signaling the way linguistic forms should be interpreted. In the subsequent sections, we will present the categories of metalinguistic strategies employed by individuals in the family court.

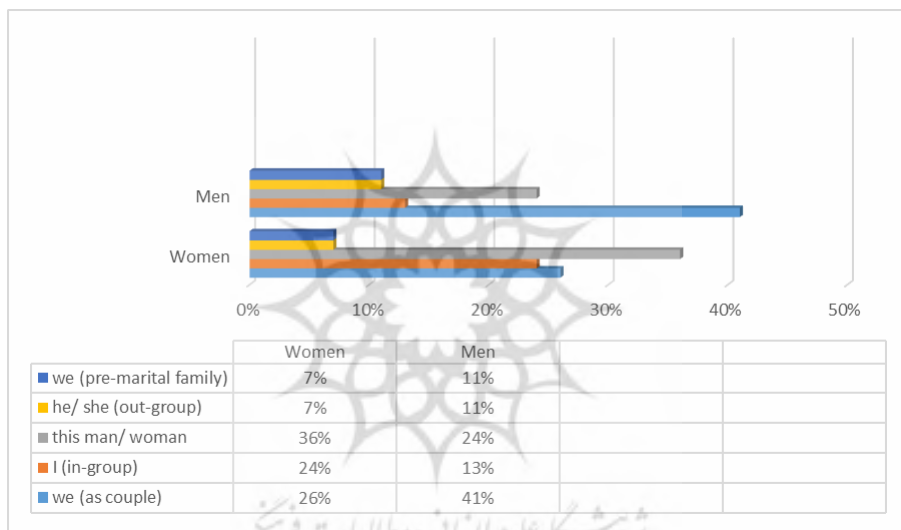
### 5.2.1. self-representation

In ideological contexts, 'self-representation' in stance-taking plays a vital role in how individuals or groups position themselves, manage identities, and express affiliations or disassociations with specific beliefs or values. Pronouns play a key role in self-representation, especially in ideological discourse. The data revealed women used 275 subject and object pronouns, while men used 258 of them in their speech. In Figure 6, it is highlighted that 26% of the pronouns used by women are first-person plural, representing things like 'our life' and 'our child'. Furthermore, the first-person singular pronoun 'I' is present in 24% of the pronouns used. Moreover, the pronoun 'this' was used 36% of the time when referring to a husband as 'this man', 7% of the times, women used the pronoun 'we' when talking about their family before marriage. 7% of the third-person pronoun 'he' was utilized

by them in reference to their husbands. This pronoun is employed when discussing the third person singular ‘he’. 41% of pronouns men used were first-person plural (referring to a couple). Moreover, the usage of the first-person singular pronoun ‘I’ were 13%, while 24% of individuals used the pronoun ‘this’ to refer to their wives. Additionally, 11% of the pronoun ‘we’ was used in relation to a man’s premarital family, and the third person singular pronoun ‘she’ represents 11% of the pronouns.

**Figure 6.**

*The proportion of ideological language used on self-representation*



In Example (27), the woman, by using ‘we’, categorized herself and her child as part of an insider group, while labeling her husband as an outsider by using the pronoun ‘his’ (behavior).

(27) W: *Ma dige nemidunim az daste raftarhaš be koja panah bebarim.*

We are unsure of where to seek a shelter from his actions.

Also, men and women sometimes use the first-person plural pronoun ‘we’ to refer to themselves and their inner group, which includes their premarital family. For instance, in the following example, the pronoun ‘we’ refers to the woman and her parents:

(28) W: *Ma har kari ke mitunestim vase in aqa kardim.*

We did everything we could for this man.

Similarly, distancing pronouns like 'they' or 's/he' help reinforce ideological boundaries between groups (Johnstone, 2009). This type of pronoun use reflects a shared stance and serves as a linguistic cue for self-identification within an ideological context. Additionally, the analysis of the data reveals that both women and men utilize the pronoun 'this' to indicate their partners in expressions like in 'xanum/ zan: woman' (29) in 'aqa/ mard: man' (30), representing a form of distance-keeping action (distancing from the out-group).

(29) M: *In xanom mohem nist vasaš zendegi.*

This woman does not care about life

(30) W: *In mard be aberu va harf-e mardom aslan tavajohi nadare.*

This man does not care about reputation and people's words at all

As can be seen in Examples (29) and (30), each of the parties using the pronoun 'this woman or this man' also expresses the unfavorable characteristics of the other party. This strategy also serves to 'othering', a way of creating ideological boundaries that separate the self or in-group from those who are viewed as ideologically opposing (Du Bois, 2007). By framing the out-group as embodying undesirable qualities, speakers can position themselves or their group in a positive light while implicitly or explicitly critiquing the out-group. Furthermore, the data indicates that women linked family life to men in 7 cases (his/ your family life) and men linked it to women in 28 cases (her/ your family life).

(31) M: *aqaye qazi in xanom bargarde sare zendegiš, man jobran mikonam.*

Your honor, if this lady gets back to her (marriage) life, I will compensate.

Through direct observation, the authors have seen numerous instances where the judge's questions were directed at women (32), portraying family life as something that pertains to women, while a similar structure was not applied to men.

(32) Lady, *hazeri bargardi sare zendegit?*

Ma'am, are you ready to go back to *your (marriage) life?*

The tendency to associate marriage life with women (e.g. ‘your life’, ‘her life’) can reflect the cultural concerns that arise about family life. Concerns like the pivotal role of women in creating families have led to the notion that family life is often associated with women rather than men.

### 5.2.2. Interruption

In ideological contexts, interruptions can serve to assert dominance, resist particular narratives, or undermine the credibility of opposing viewpoints. A speaker might interrupt to prevent the out-group from making a point or to question their credibility in mid-sentence. Data analysis in the present study revealed that speakers may interrupt opponents to prevent them from presenting their arguments fully, thus asserting dominance and promoting their own stance (33).

(33) M: Man hamiše dar xedmat-e xanevade budam va✱<sup>1</sup>

I was always at the service of the family and

W: Hičvaqt nabudi, bixodi dastan sare ham nakon.

You have never been there. Don’t make up stories.

Interruptions can also function as a way to undermine or delegitimize the viewpoints of others. In Example (34), a speaker might interrupt to prevent the out-group from making a point or to question their credibility in the mid-sentence.

(34) W: *Hame karhaye xune ru duš-e man hast, in aqa az hiči xabar nadare, hata ✱*

All the household chores are on my shoulders; this man doesn’t even know about anything

M: *Šoma če kari tu xune anjam midi? Az sobh ta šab saret hamaš tu guši hast.*

What do you do at home? Your head is on the phone from morning to night.

This tactic often disrupts the coherence of the opponent’s argument and casts doubt on their authority or legitimacy (Kendon, 1990). Such interruptions serve to challenge the opposing ideology while positioning the interrupter’s viewpoint as superior. We observed that, in the family court, interruptions often indicate disagreement and serve as immediate markers of ideological opposition. By

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1. This symbol indicates the interruption.

interrupting with rebuttals, questions, or contrasting points, speakers can quickly signal that they are in opposition to the idea being presented. In Example (35), the speaker interrupts with 'he lies' signaling a stance that conflicts with the one being advanced.

(35) M: *Dige čekar konsm išun razi bašan, man hame tavajoham be zendegim-e* ✕

What else can I do to make them happy? I am all focused on my life

W: *Doruq mige, hame vaqteš ba dustaš be ayaši migzare.*

He lies, he spends all his time with his friend and partying.

In this study, we investigated the instances of speech interruption in relation to dominance and the common characteristics of both dominant and defeated individuals. The 'dominant participant' interrupts the defeated participant; likewise, the 'defeated participant' is assigned to someone whose speech has been interrupted. In Table 2, out of 2,240 utterances, 173 contain interruptions.

**Table 2.**

*The proportion of interruption used by participants in family court*

Court	total number of cases	total number of utterances	total number of interruptions	the average proportion of dominance in utterances (%)
Family	25	2240	173	5/5

Table 3 shows that out of the total average usage of interruptions, women have interrupted the other party by 0.7 and men by 0.2. Therefore, it can be concluded that men are mostly considered as defeated participants in using the tactic of interrupting speech.

**Table 3.**

*The average proportion of dominance in the family court*

Court	participant	the average proportion of dominance in utterances (%)	total
Family	women	0.77	0.97
	men	0.20	

### 5.2.3. Overlapping talk (OT)

OT describes a scenario where Participant A narrates an event, while Participant B employs an interruption strategy to disturb A's storytelling and simultaneously shares his own account with the court. Consequently, two or more participants are talking at the same time, addressing each other or the judge. In a family court, both men and women seek to convey their shared life stories to the judge. In the meantime, interference can be viewed as a powerful tactic in family court discussions, employed by lay participants to elevate their narrative above others. Among the 26 cases examined, participants employed the OT in 9 cases. Indeed, in the cases referred to, both man and woman took part, whereas, in the other cases, only a single participant attended alongside the lawyer of the opposing party. As shown in Table 6, among the 1,196 instances of utterances, 31 examples of OT are noted. This amount is equal to 0.7%.

**Table 4.**

*The average proportion of OT to utterances produced in the family court*

court	number of cases with OT	total number of utterances	total number of OT	average ratio of OT in utterances
Family	9	1196	31	0.76

Table 7 displays the total word count for all the relevant files (document length) alongside the word count generated in OT. Additionally, the level of participation according to their gender in every section is also shown. In every instance of OT, participants included both men and women, leading to the conclusion that the emergence of the OT phenomenon is directly related to the gender of those engaged in the discourse. The information in Table 7 indicates that in the family court, both participants (men and women) had an equal contribution to the advancement of OT.

**Table 5.**

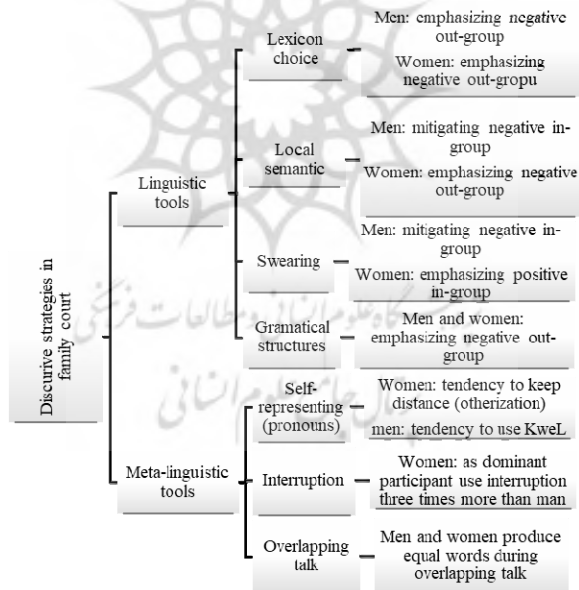
*Words shared by participants in the family court*

Court	Number of cases	Gender	Total number of words in cases	Number of words exchanged in OT	Words produced by participant	Contribution of participant case	Contribution of participant in OT
Family	9	Woman	16219	2848	1257	0.582	4.409
		Man	16219	2848	1591	0.728	4.590

It was found from the data analysis that otherization is shown in the family court through various linguistic and meta-linguistic strategies. The findings indicated that women are more likely to engage in othering by highlighting the flaws of non-introverts and highlighting the strengths of introverts in their use of language tactics. Conversely, through the use of language tools, men tend to view others differently by highlighting their flaws while downplaying their own and those of their group. In terms of meta-linguistics, men tend to bond more with their spouses, using 'we' to refer to themselves and their partners. Meanwhile, women tend to distance themselves from their spouses and use pronouns that highlight this divide. Additionally, women use interruptions nearly three times more often than men, indicating their inclination to assert dominance in conversations.

**Figure 7.**

*Linguistic and metalinguistic tools in the family court under study*



## 6. Conclusion

This study critically examined how participants in Iranian family courts use linguistic and metalinguistic strategies to construct persuasive narratives, position themselves ideologically, and assert agency within the institutional setting of marital

dispute resolution. The courtroom emerges as a discursive arena where language becomes a powerful instrument for navigating emotional, social, and legal complexities. Through strategic speech choices, both male and female participants engaged in nuanced performances of identity, credibility, and ideological alignment. At the linguistic level, participants relied on carefully selected lexical items, ideologically charged meaning conveyed, swearing, and grammatical constructions to influence judicial perception. Women frequently emphasized emotional neglect, parental irresponsibility, and legal failings of their spouses, while projecting themselves as resilient and morally upright. This dual positioning, victimized yet virtuous, was used to appeal to the judge's sense of justice and sympathy. In contrast, men tended to highlight their financial contributions, downplay personal faults, and frame criticisms against them as unwarranted. Their discourse often reflected traditional gender norms, associating financial provision with moral responsibility. Swearing played a notable role, especially among men, functioning as a credibility-enhancing device. When confronted with accusations, invoking sacred terms or oaths served to validate their narratives and deny wrongdoing. Similarly, the use of grammatical elements, such as negative constructions and deontic modals like 'must', revealed the way speakers distanced themselves from blame, imposed expectations on others, and reinforced in-group morality. These linguistic features reflected broader social ideologies embedded in the understanding of marital roles and responsibilities.

Metalinguistic strategies such as self-representation, interruption, and overlapping talk further enriched the ideological dynamics of courtroom interaction. Pronoun use was particularly revealing; women often used demonstratives and third-person references ('this man') to mark distance from their spouses, while men more frequently used inclusive pronouns like 'we' to imply unity or shared responsibility. These patterns suggest a gendered orientation toward conflict, women asserting separation, and men attempting reconciliation or self-rehabilitation. Interruptions, largely initiated by women, were used to challenge dominant narratives, assert voice, and resist marginalization in a traditionally male-dominated setting. This discursive assertiveness can be interpreted as a response to historical silencing or underrepresentation in legal discourse. Overlapping talk, used by both genders, demonstrated the contested and competitive nature of courtroom speech, where

narrative control is often negotiated in real language situations. To contextualize these observations, the study applied Van Dijk's (1997, 2006) framework of the ideological square, which outlines four key discursive strategies: emphasizing in-group positives, highlighting out-group negatives, downplaying in-group shortcomings, and minimizing out-group strengths. These strategies were clearly evident across both linguistic and metalinguistic levels. Women leaned more heavily on highlighting others' faults and distancing themselves from the opposing party, while men tended to mitigate their own failings and promote a collective narrative. However, both genders engaged in selective evaluations and strategic narration to align themselves with favorable ideological positions.

By combining the concepts of otherization and the ideological square, this research offers a finer explanation of how language constructs social identities and moral hierarchies in courtroom settings. The findings highlight that courtroom discourse is not ideologically neutral but is deliberately formulated by speakers for promoting individual agendas, gaining institutional legitimacy, and recontextualizing blame or responsibility. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on discourse and ideology in legal contexts. It highlights the importance of recognizing language as a site of power, where ordinary speakers draw upon culturally and socially informed discursive practices to navigate institutional spaces. For discourse analysts, sociolinguists, and legal practitioners alike, these insights emphasize the critical role of language in shaping perceptions, reinforcing societal norms, and influencing judicial outcomes in family court settings.

### **Author Contributions**

P.N. was responsible for the initial conceptualization of the study and data collection. A.J. carried out the preparation of the original draft of the manuscript. M.R.M. contributed to the validation of the findings, formal analysis, and investigation. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

### **Data Availability Statement**

Due to the sensitive nature of the data and ethical concerns related to participant

confidentiality in family court settings, the datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available. However, anonymized excerpts of the data may be provided by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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### **Ethical Considerations**

Although no formal ethical code was issued for this study, all ethical principles related to research involving human participants were strictly observed. All personal and identifying information was fully removed or anonymized to ensure participant confidentiality and privacy. The authors strictly adhered to principles of academic integrity and avoided all forms of data fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, and scientific misconduct.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### **Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process**

The authors confirm that no generative AI or AI-assisted tools were used at any stage of the research or writing process.

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