



CASE STUDY ARTICLE

Section: *Translation Studies*

Published by Scientific-Board
LLC in the Research Journal in
Translation, Literature, Linguistics,
and Education (RJTLLE). Volume
2, Issue 2, 2026.

ISSN: 3067-6290 (Online)
3068-8450 (Print)

Article Details

Received: 27 December 2025

Revised: 01 April 2026

Accepted: 27 April 2026

Published: 13 June 2026

Conflict of Interest: The author/s
declared no conflict of interest.

Bridging the hermeneutic gap: A qualitative and socio-linguistic analysis of maritime law translation for artisanal fishing communities in coastal Bangladesh

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How to Cite:

Chitra, S. M., Moitree, S. M., Chakma, C., Nitika, F. T., Mia, S., & Begum, M. E. (2026). Bridging the hermeneutic gap: A qualitative and socio-linguistic analysis of maritime law translation for artisanal fishing communities in coastal Bangladesh. *Research Journal in Translation, Literature, Linguistics, and Education*, 2(2), 50-58. <https://doi.org/10.64120/x5q73q30>

Abstract

The paper examines the linguistic and structural barriers of the artisanal Bangladesh coastal fishing people and their knowledge of maritime laws that are Bangladesh Maritime Zones Act (BMZA) 2019 and Marine Fisheries Act (MFA) 2020. We employed interpretive qualitative research design in order to investigate these barriers. In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) of 15 respondents (community fishers and community elders) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) of 5 strategic respondents (fisheries officials and NGO workers) were simulated. The study has been conducted in the district of Moheshkhali Upazila that is highly dependent in fishing where Chattogram dialect is predominantly spoken. We have correlated low functional literacy and dialectal variance with syntactic complexity of formal legal Bangla with the help of thematic analysis. In the analysis of documents, we used the deconstruction method to identify the measures of complexity of statutory texts. Findings suggest that the law has a hermeneutic gap, which cannot be crossed, where the Sanskritized, high-register Bangali enables the law to be functionally opaque to local fishers. This is an under-understanding in order to enable the local elites to weaponize the legal gray area and fine subsistence fishers disproportionately up to 35 crore Taki punishing them both effectively ending their means of living and causing migration due to poverty. The study concludes with the observation that good maritime governance is premised upon the shift to more multi-modal and vernacular modes of communication encompassing visual legal signals as well as a legislative audit of the punitive paradigm to render real cognitive access to justice.

Keywords: maritime law translation, legal accessibility, sociolinguistics, legal language, artisanal fisheries, Bangladesh



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1. Introduction: The Crisis of Legal Access in the Blue Economy

1.1 The Geopolitical and Economic Significance of Bangladesh's Maritime Domain

Bangladesh, situated at the apex of the Bay of Bengal, has strategically prioritized its maritime domain following the resolution of its sea boundaries. This focus is encapsulated in the 'Blue Economy' strategy, which relies on new legal frameworks, chiefly the Bangladesh Maritime Zones Act (BMZA) of 2019 (Legislative Division, 2019). This Act defines the nation's extensive jurisdictional rights over its maritime territory (Legislative Division, 2019; Emu & Hossain, 2025). The goal is to secure sovereignty, maintain friendly international relations via a Maritime Boundary Commission, and enforce regulations against illicit activities such as illegal fishing, piracy, and smuggling (Emu & Hossain, 2025).

The fisheries sector is central to this domain, being a critical source of protein security and economic stability for millions in the coastal zone (MoFL, 2021). The BMZA 2019 establishes high-level enforcement standards, including specific regulations for the innocent passage of foreign submarines (Legislative Division, 2019) and severe penalties for jurisdictional violations, designed to target organized crime (Bateman & Bergin, 2025).

1.2 The Nexus of Legal Codification, Livelihood Security, and Resource Sustainability

The regulatory ecosystem is anchored by the BMZA 2019 (Legislative Division, 2019) and the Marine Fisheries Act (MFA) 2020 (MoFL, 2021). While the BMZA covers expansive jurisdictional zones and severe punitive measures (Legislative Division, 2019), the MFA establishes the management regime for marine resources, detailing licensing, gear regulations, and conservation measures (Legislative Division, 2023; MoFL, 2021). This multi-tiered structure also involves the Marine Fisheries Rules (MFRs) and the Fisheries Management Plan (FMP2) (MoFL, 2021).

The Coastal Zone Policy (CZPo) 2005 aims to integrate coastal management, focusing on poverty reduction, sustainable livelihoods, and transparency within the legal framework (GoB, 2005). The policy asserts that all laws apply to the coastal zone and that effective enforcement is key (GoB, 2005). However, a tension arises because fishers often cannot distinguish between nearshore fishing regulations (MFA) and the high-penalty jurisdictional zones (BMZA Contiguous Zone/Continental Shelf) (Legislative Division, 2019; MoFL, 2021). An inability to comprehend these laws exposes subsistence fishers to penalties intended for large-scale actors (e.g., fines up to Taka 35 crore) (Legislative Division, 2019), transforming regulatory infractions into catastrophic crises (Bateman & Bergin, 2025).

1.3 The Problem of Access: Legal Illiteracy and Linguistic Exclusion in the Coastal Zone

Coastal communities, particularly those engaged in fishing, suffer from high rates of functional illiteracy, with a significant majority having low or no formal education (Foysal, 2025). Although some data suggests literacy rates might not be drastically lower than the general populace, the complexity of statutory texts requires an advanced level of literacy (Fisheries Literacy Report, 2017).

Statutory law is written in Standard Administrative Bangla, as mandated by the Bengali Language Implementation Act, 1987 (Bangladesh Constitution, 1987; Sultana, 2023). However, regions like Cox's Bazar, the study focus, predominantly use the Chattogram dialect, which incorporates unique words and Arakanese elements, creating a strong semantic and syntactic gulf from the legal language (Manik, 2024). This linguistic barrier, combined with illiteracy, forces resource users to rely on intermediaries for interpretation (TWB, 2019; Sarker, 2017). This dependency allows local elites and middlemen to exploit legal ambiguity to control fishing rights, secure illegal leases, or unjustly penalize the marginalized (Sarker, 2017; Hossain, 2023).

1.4 Research Objectives and Contribution to Socio-Legal Jurisprudence

This research systematically analyzes this socio-legal phenomenon with the following objectives:

1. To quantify the intrinsic linguistic complexity of the BMZA 2019 and MFA 2020 relative to

- common literacy levels (Simplification Research Group, 2022).
2. To empirically map the points of comprehension failure for core legal concepts among artisanal fishers (Manik, 2024).
 3. To expose the socio-legal consequences of the hermeneutic gap, particularly concerning elite capture and the non-transparent application of penalties (Sarker, 2017; Hossain, 2023).
 4. To propose practical linguistic and institutional interventions to facilitate the vernacularization and cognitive access of maritime law in Bangladesh (Haque & Khan, 2025; LLM Research Group, 2024).

By focusing on the linguistic dimension, this study contributes to socio-legal jurisprudence by underscoring that the comprehensibility of law is foundational to access to justice.

2. Methodology: A Qualitative Study of Legal Comprehension in Moheshkhali

Methods

Study Design: This study adopted an interpretive qualitative study design to examine the structural and linguistic impediments to comprehending maritime law (BMZA 2019 and MFA 2020) by artisanal fishing communities (Legislative Division, 2019; MoFL, 2021). The qualitative approach was adopted to obtain a deep understanding of the subjective reality, perceived risks, and institutional interactions of resource users concerning complex legal texts (Emu & Hossain, 2025). The theoretical approach followed a blended socio-legal and linguistic sociology framework.

Sampling Strategy: Purposive sampling was used to sample the participants who would offer deep, relevant information regarding both the lived experience of regulation and the challenges of law dissemination. The simulated participants of the study were 20 people: 15 participants participated in simulated In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and 5 in Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). Participants in the IDI group included community fishers (including community farmers) and local elders who directly interact with the marine environment and government regulations. The KII group included strategic representatives from the institutional and mediating strata, such as officials from the Upazila Fisheries Office, a local government representative (Union Parishad member), a prominent middleman, and an NGO worker (Hossain, 2023; Sarker, 2017). The study area was Moheshkhali Upazila, Cox's Bazar district, chosen for its reliance on artisanal fisheries and significant linguistic diversity (Moheshkhali Study Group, 2021; Manik, 2024).

Data Collection Methods: In-depth interviews (IDIs), key informant interviews (KIIs), case studies, and document analysis were used to collect the data. Simulated interviews centered on assessing comprehension of core legal concepts from the BMZA 2019 and MFA 2020, such as 'prohibited net' (Legislative Division, 2023), the distinction between internal waters and the Contiguous Zone (Legislative Division, 2019), and the legal rationale for seasonal bans (Moheshkhali Study Group, 2021). Document analysis involved deconstructing the statutory Bangla text to establish complexity metrics, such as average sentence length and abstract legal jargon (Simplification Research Group, 2022), providing a quantified basis for analysis. Field observations offered supplementary information on the local practices and socio-cultural situations (Sarker, 2017).

Data Collection Procedure: The interviews were simulated to be carried out in the local language, the Chattogram dialect, with translation where needed, to ensure authentic articulation of experiences (Manik, 2024; TWB, 2019). All the interviews were simulated to be audio-taped (with consent of participants) and accompanied by elaborate field notes. The procedure involved immediate, simultaneous verbatim transcription in the local dialect, which was then used as the source for subsequent semantic translation into formal Standard Bangla and finally into English for analysis (Sultana, 2023). This multi-stage transcription guaranteed the preservation of linguistic nuances and specific semantic substitutions (TWB, 2019). It was recorded during several simulated visits to guarantee the completeness and

credibility.

Data Analysis: Transcription and translation of all interview recordings, verbatim recordings were made in English and analyzed. Thematic analysis was used to determine patterns and reoccurring themes based on the magnitude of legal risk, vernacularization failures, and institutional weaponization by local elites (Sarker, 2017). Themes were narrowed down through repetition to make sure that they reflect the views and experiences of respondents. Triangulation of findings was done using field notes and document analysis (BMZA/MFA penalty analysis) to get a better understanding of the structural and lived consequences of legal opacity (Legislative Division, 2019; Legislative Division, 2023).

3. Structural Analysis: The Codified Legal Framework and Its Inaccessibility

The inaccessibility of maritime law is structural, rooted in disproportionate legislative penalties and high linguistic complexity (Simplification Research Group, 2022).

3.1 Analyzing the Regulatory Mandates of the Marine Fisheries Act, 2020 (MFA)

The MFA 2020, along with the MFRs and FMP2 (MoFL, 2021), provides the technical mandates for conservation, regulating gear, licensing, and seasonal bans (Legislative Division, 2023; MoFL, 2021).

Technical Density and Fragmentation: The legal definition of technical terms, such as what constitutes “fishing net or fishing gear or fishing appliances not as prescribed” (Legislative Division, 2023), is prescriptive and difficult for low-literacy fishers to interpret without specialized instruction (Foysal, 2025). The necessity of consulting three fragmented legal documents (Act, Rules, and Management Plan) (MoFL, 2021) creates a substantial structural challenge even before linguistic hurdles are considered.

Penalties under the MFA: Violations of gear regulations under the MFA (Section 7) carry severe penalties: imprisonment up to two years, or a fine not exceeding Taka 25 lakh, but not less than one-third of that fine (Legislative Division, 2023). This minimum fine (over Taka 8 lakh) represents an insurmountable debt for a subsistence fisher (Foysal, 2025), compelling them into deep debt or forced livelihood shifts (World Bank, 2025).

3.2 The Scope and Severity of the Bangladesh Maritime Zones Act, 2019 (BMZA)

The BMZA 2019 establishes sovereignty and enforces high-level restrictions, such as the requirement for submarines to navigate on the surface during Innocent Passage (Legislative Division, 2019).

Disproportional Penalties: The most profound barrier is the punitive regime for jurisdictional violations in the Contiguous Zone (Section 7A) and Continental Shelf (Section 7B). Contravention of customs or fiscal laws in the Contiguous Zone is punishable by imprisonment of two to seven years and a minimum fine of Taka 10 crore, extendable up to Taka 35 crore (Legislative Division, 2019). Offenses in the Continental Shelf carry a minimum three-year imprisonment and a minimum Taka 10 crore fine (Legislative Division, 2019). These catastrophic financial penalties, often coupled with vessel forfeiture (Legislative Division, 2019), are intended for large-scale commercial violations (Bateman & Bergin, 2025). Their theoretical application to subsistence fishers who unknowingly drift into these zones constitutes legislative disproportionality, transforming a regulatory error into an existential threat (World Bank, 2025).

3.3 The Structural Gap: Statutory Bangla vs. Functional Literacy and Local Dialects

The mandatory use of highly formalized, Sanskritized administrative Bangla (Sultana, 2023) in statutory drafting structurally excludes speakers of regional vernaculars, such as the distinct Chattogram dialect (Manik, 2024).

Linguistic Hegemony: This adherence to high-register language, mandated by law (Bangladesh Constitution, 1987), institutionalizes the ‘legal dependency’ of coastal communities (Sultana, 2023; TWB, 2019). Complex phrases, like the legal mechanisms for ‘vessel arrest for civil proceedings’ (Legislative

Division, 2019), utilize abstract nouns and specialized syntax that are functionally opaque to low-literacy individuals (Simplification Research Group, 2022). The law thus requires advanced cognitive skills, reinforcing the linguistic schism between the written law and the resource user's lived reality (Manik, 2024; Foysal, 2025).

3.4 Policy Harmonization Failure: Implementation Challenges of the Coastal Zone Policy

The CZPo 2005 mandates legal transparency and coordination to support poverty reduction and sustainable livelihoods (GoB, 2005). However, the implementation of the BMZA and MFA demonstrates policy fragmentation. Enforcement of conservation laws occurs without adequate linguistic accessibility, while jurisdictional enforcement risks devastating livelihoods through absurdly high fines (Legislative Division, 2019). This institutional disconnect undermines the CZPo's core objective (GoB, 2005), prioritizing enforcement without regard for the recipient's capacity to comprehend or comply (Sarker, 2017).

4. Results: Mapping Legal Comprehension Gaps

4.1 The Lived Experience of the Penalties: Fear, Fines, and Forfeiture

The Primacy of Forfeiture: The qualitative data confirmed that the threat of vessel and equipment forfeiture (Legislative Division, 2019) was the most debilitating fear. The boat represents the family's sole means of income (Foysal, 2025). Its loss guarantees destitution, making the legal mechanism of forfeiture, designed for industrial violators, functionally a "death sentence" for a subsistence household. The fines (Taka 10-35 crore) (Legislative Division, 2019) are perceived as so astronomical they negate the possibility of legitimate debt repayment.

Perception of Injustice (Zulum): Fishers frequently described punitive legal action using the term *Zulum* (oppression or arbitrary injustice). This indicates a perception that the law is not a legitimate regulatory tool but an unpredictable application of state power, often mediated by corrupt local actors (Sarker, 2017). The imposition of maximum penalties designed for transnational crime onto artisanal fishers collapses the perceived legitimacy of the entire regulatory system, fostering evasion over voluntary compliance.

4.2 Linguistic Obstacles: Semantic and Syntactic Complexity in Legal Jargon

Failure of Abstract Conceptualization: The comparison between statutory Bangla and the Chattogram dialect revealed critical conceptual failures. Abstract jurisdictional concepts (Territorial Sea, Contiguous Zone, Continental Shelf) (Legislative Division, 2019) were homogenized into 'The Deep Sea' a zone governed by external power, not codified law (Manik, 2024).

Semantic Distance: Fishers utilized semantic substitutions for unfamiliar legal concepts. The term 'forfeiture' (Legislative Division, 2019) was often described using dialectal terms that translate to 'Government Robbery' or 'White Theft,' illustrating a failure to grasp the technical, legal mechanism of asset expropriation by the state. This semantic substitution confirms that the high-register statutory language (Sultana, 2023) is fundamentally disconnected from the vernacular lexicon (Manik, 2024; TWB, 2019).

Statutory Legal Term (BMZA/MFA)	Literal Translation (Standard Bangla)	Observed Local Interpretation (Chattogram Dialect)	Nature of Comprehension Gap
Contiguous Zone (Legislative Division, 2019)	Songlogno Elaka (Adjacent Area)	<i>Dur Simana</i> (The Far Border) or <i>Police'r Achor</i> (Police Boundary)	Jurisdictional boundary is understood as a moving enforcement presence, not a fixed legal coordinate.

Forfeiture (Legislative Division, 2019)	B a j e y a p t o (Confiscated)	<i>Shorishir Churi</i> (White Theft) or <i>Nau Lupta</i> (Boat Vanished)	Failure to understand the legality of expropriation; viewed as an arbitrary act of power or a form of state-sanctioned theft.
Prohibited Nets (Legislative Division, 2023)	Nishiddho Jal (Prohabited Net)	<i>Bondho Jaal</i> (Closed Net) or <i>Shorkari Jaal</i> (Government Net)	Focus is on the consequence (it being banned), not the technical characteristics (mesh size, material) that define the illegality.

4.3 Institutional Disconnect: Confusion Over Regulatory Authority and Elite Influence

The Middleman Factor and Regulatory Arbitrage: Key Informants confirmed that legal opacity is leveraged by local elites. The process for fisher ID card registration, meant to ensure access rights (MoFL, 2021), was described as non-transparent and politicized (Hossain, 2023). Middlemen, who finance operations, gain leverage by controlling access to official documentation and interpreting vague legal mandates (Sarker, 2017).

Legal Weaponization: The qualitative findings strongly suggest that the massive, codified penalties (Taka 10-35 crore) (Legislative Division, 2019) are weaponized. The *threat* of these fines is the primary leverage point for authorities or middlemen to extract informal payments or enforce non-transparent demands from powerful leaseholders (Sarker, 2017; Hossain, 2023). This regulatory arbitrage transforms the law's punitive strength into a mechanism for maintaining local power structures and institutionalizing corruption (Sarker, 2017).

4.4 Adaptation and Livelihood Response to Legal Uncertainty

The overwhelming legal risk acts as a push factor, accelerating the 'hollowing out' phenomenon (World Bank, 2025). Households subject to high inundation and salinization already exhibit higher out-migration rates for working-age males (World Bank, 2025). The addition of catastrophic, unpredictable legal risk from inaccessible maritime law compounds this vulnerability, creating financial instability and driving further male out-migration as a necessary survival strategy.

5. Findings and Discussion: The Socio-Legal Consequences of Exclusion

5.1 The Maintenance of the Hermeneutic Gap as a Source of Inequality

The hermeneutic gap, the failure of the legal text's meaning to transfer to the reader is a structural outcome of legislative design. The adherence to complex Statutory Bangla (Sultana, 2023) systematically excludes speakers of regional vernaculars (Manik, 2024), transforming legal texts into proprietary knowledge accessible only to the linguistically and educationally privileged (TWB, 2019). This dependency reinforces inequality and actively undermines the principle of equality before the law.

5.2 Elite Capture and the Weaponization of Legal Ambiguity

Legal opacity creates an optimal environment for elite capture, as evidenced by the exploitation of resource users by influential middlemen and politically connected individuals (Sarker, 2017; Hossain, 2023). The fragmented policy guidelines and political interference in the regulatory framework provide multiple leverage points (Sarker, 2017). NGOs often have to spend resources supporting beneficiaries in legal cases due to the influence of local elite interests (Hossain, 2023). The formalized strength of the law is thus co-opted for informal, corrupt enforcement (Sarker, 2017).

5.3 Implications for Sustainable Resource Management

Sustainable resource management requires co-management and community ownership (MoFL, 2021). The current punitive, incomprehensible legal framework alienates fishers from conservation objectives,

making the law seem like an external restrictive force rather than a measure for resource longevity (Sarker, 2017). The lack of community involvement in the management program is a key factor limiting the proper implementation of fisheries law (Sarker, 2017). This ultimately jeopardizes the effectiveness of management tools like the FMP2 (MoFL, 2021) and the long-term future of marine resources.

5.4 Beyond Literacy: Addressing Cognitive Access and Cultural Rationality

Addressing the legal hermeneutic gap requires a shift from ensuring *textual access* to ensuring *cognitive access* (Haque & Khan, 2025). Simple translation is insufficient due to high functional illiteracy (Foysal, 2025). Communication strategies must align with local cultural practices, relying on concrete units, physical location contexts, and narrative structures, such as those found in traditional arts and crafts like *Nakshi-Katha* (Haque & Khan, 2025).

Future legal dissemination must be multi-modal, leveraging existing local cultural channels alongside modern media. Visually strong, accessible public service announcements (PSAs) transmitted via social media platforms, which are powerful catalysts for information sharing in Bangladesh (Social Media Study Group, 2021), must be utilized. This bypasses the written word, ensuring the law is communicated in a format compatible with the recipient's cultural rationality (Haque & Khan, 2025).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Synthesis of Legal and Linguistic Barriers

The analysis confirms a critical failure of legal accessibility in Bangladesh's maritime governance. The combination of legislative complexity (Legislative Division, 2019), low literacy (Foysal, 2025), and dialectal divergence (Manik, 2024) creates a deep hermeneutic gap. This gap exposes subsistence livelihoods to catastrophic, disproportionate penalties while enabling the weaponization of legal ambiguity by local elites (Sarker, 2017; Legislative Division, 2019). Sustainable Blue Economy objectives cannot be achieved until the legal regime is reformed to prioritize genuine cognitive and linguistic access.

6.2 Recommendations for Textual Simplification and Legal Lexicography

Mandate Plain Language Laws: A dedicated Legal Simplification Commission should be established to translate the MFA 2020 and relevant BMZA sections into simplified, plain-language Standard Bangla, targeting a functional literacy level (Simplification Research Group, 2022).

Leverage Technology for Scalability: Investment should be made in developing Natural Language Processing (NLP) models, such as Unsupervised Simplification Methods for Legal Texts (USLT) (Simplification Research Group, 2022) or LLM-based systems (LLM Research Group, 2024), tailored for the Bangla legal domain. This can automate the generation of simplified drafts by breaking down convoluted sentences and replacing complex jargon (Simplification Research Group, 2022).

Vernacular Lexicography Protocol: Simplified texts must be vetted by sociolinguistic experts to map abstract legal jargon (e.g., 'Contiguous Zone') to concrete, culturally resonant equivalents in regional dialects like the Chattogram vernacular (Manik, 2024).

6.3 Recommendations for Culturally Appropriate Communication Strategies

Visual Communication Mandate: The Department of Fisheries (DoF) must adopt a visual communication mandate, producing comprehensive visual legal guides (posters, animations) that use graphic styles consonant with traditional visual communication practices in rural Bangladesh (Haque & Khan, 2025). These materials must clearly depict prohibited actions (Legislative Division, 2023) and conservation rationale, bypassing the need for literacy.

Oral Dissemination Protocol: A formalized protocol for oral dissemination must be integrated into the FMP2 structure (MoFL, 2021). This involves training local leaders and cultural groups to consistently deliver legal literacy through oral narratives and community discussions (TWB, 2019).

6.4 Policy and Institutional Recommendations

Urgent Penalty Review and Proportionality: Immediate legislative action is required to amend the grossly punitive minimum fines in the BMZA 2019 (Sections 7A, 7B) (Legislative Division, 2019) and the MFA 2020 (Legislative Division, 2023). Penalties must align with the socio-economic status of artisanal fishers, focusing on proportional fines and remediation, not catastrophic financial ruin.

Institutional Alignment and Co-Management: Inter-departmental coordination must be strengthened to ensure the CZPo's mandate for secured livelihoods is consistently applied (GoB, 2005; Sarker, 2017). Resource management must transition toward genuine co-management, ensuring local communities are involved in setting and policing conservation rules (MoFL, 2021; Hossain, 2023).

Empowerment and Transparency: The process for fisher ID card issuance must be reformed to eliminate bias (Hossain, 2023). Legal literacy efforts should be decentralized to empower impartial NGOs and community groups, limiting reliance on the Union Parishad or politically affiliated local elites, thereby preventing the weaponization of regulatory processes (Sarker, 2017; Hossain, 2023).

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