

CONFLICT-GENERATING FORMULATIONS IN GOVERNMENTAL CORRESPONDENCE: A PSYCHOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE WITH EVIDENCE FROM KAZAKHSTAN

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ABSTRACT

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Conflict-generating formulations in official governmental correspondence constitute a significant yet underexamined factor influencing institutional legitimacy and public trust. While administrative discourse is traditionally characterised by procedural precision and formal neutrality, psycholinguistic research demonstrates that linguistic framing, modality, and pragmatic positioning shape cognitive appraisal, emotional response, and perceived fairness. This article presents a structured interdisciplinary literature review integrating psycholinguistics, discourse studies, and public administration research to identify linguistic mechanisms that provoke defensiveness, escalation, and negative interpretation in communication between government officials and citizens. Particular attention is given to lexical absolutism, implicit blame constructions, depersonalised institutional voice, and asymmetrical framing. The discussion incorporates evidence from Kazakhstan, where recent studies reveal persistent gaps in communicative competencies among civil servants and increasing sensitivity to public-facing administrative language. The findings suggest that conflictogenicity emerges from the interaction between authority markers and cognitive threat perception, especially in contexts of power asymmetry. The article proposes linguistically informed strategies to mitigate escalation risks while preserving legal precision. By linking psycholinguistic mechanisms with governance communication practices, the study contributes to the development of conflict-sensitive models of official correspondence relevant to transitional and digitally mediated governance systems.

Keywords: *conflictogenicity; governmental communication; psycholinguistics; conflict-generating formulations; public trust; Kazakhstan; administrative discourse.*

INTRODUCTION

Effective governmental communication is not merely a technical exercise in information transmission; it is a central mechanism of institutional legitimacy construction. Official correspondence — responses to complaints, regulatory notices, administrative decisions — constitutes a primary interface between state authorities and citizens. In this interaction, linguistic choices carry normative and psychological consequences that extend beyond procedural content.

Contemporary research in public administration demonstrates that transparency, tone, and explanatory clarity significantly influence trust in government institutions (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2017; Porumbescu, 2017). At the same time, psycholinguistic models emphasise that individuals process institutional messages through affective and heuristic pathways, particularly in contexts of perceived power asymmetry (Kahneman, 2011; Bavel et al., 2022). Under such conditions, specific linguistic markers — categorical modality, depersonalised

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constructions, implicit blame structures – may activate cognitive threat responses and intensify negative interpretative bias.

Despite growing attention to digital governance and institutional transparency, the conflictogenic potential of administrative language remains insufficiently systematised. Bureaucratic discourse prioritises legal precision and standardisation; however, the same structural features that ensure procedural clarity may unintentionally reinforce perceptions of distance, rigidity, or injustice.

This issue is particularly relevant in governance systems undergoing communicative and institutional transformation, such as Kazakhstan. Recent empirical studies reveal persistent challenges in civil servants' communicative competencies, including limited emphasis on audience-oriented framing and relational clarity (Bokayev et al., 2024a; Iskindirova et al., 2024). In digitally connected environments where official correspondence may become publicly circulated, micro-level linguistic decisions acquire macro-level reputational significance.

This article examines the issue by reviewing and synthesising existing literature in psycholinguistics, framing theory, procedural justice, and governance communication. It aims to identify and systematise linguistic features that contribute to conflict in official correspondence and to develop evidence-based strategies for reducing escalation risks while preserving institutional authority and legal accuracy.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a structured narrative literature review methodology. The research does not involve primary empirical data collection; rather, it systematically synthesises theoretical and empirical scholarship at the intersection of psycholinguistics, discourse analysis, and public administration. The review prioritises peer-reviewed journal articles and academic monographs published between 2000 and 2024, with particular emphasis on contemporary studies addressing institutional trust, framing effects, cognitive threat perception, administrative transparency, and digital governance (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2017; Porumbescu, 2017; Van Noordt and Misuraca, 2020; Bavel et al., 2022). Foundational works in framing theory and cognitive psychology (Entman, 1993; Kahneman, 2011; Tyler, 2006) provide the conceptual basis for interpreting linguistic mechanisms of conflict. Additional emphasis is placed on recent empirical research examining communicative practices in Kazakhstan's public administration system (Bokayev et al., 2024a; Bokayev et al., 2024b; Iskindirova et al., 2024). These studies were selected due to their relevance to civil servant communication competencies and institutional trust dynamics.

Sources were analysed using thematic synthesis. Recurrent linguistic markers associated with negative emotional reaction, perceived injustice, and escalation were identified and categorised into three dimensions:

- Lexical (modality, evaluative vocabulary)
- Syntactic (agency suppression, nominalisation)
- Pragmatic (framing, relational positioning, explanatory transparency)

The analysis focuses on conceptual integration rather than quantitative measurement. The objective is to identify and systematise linguistic patterns and to explain how administrative language interacts with psycholinguistic processes in generating conflict potential in governmental correspondence.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis of interdisciplinary literature demonstrates that conflict-generating formulations in official governmental correspondence emerge from the interaction between linguistic structure, cognitive processing, and institutional context. Conflict potential is rarely embedded in explicit hostility; rather, it arises when administrative language activates psychological mechanisms associated with threat perception, blame attribution, and social distance.

The following section presents the key findings of the study, structured around three interrelated dimensions of conflict-generating communication: lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic features. It examines how these linguistic elements interact with psycholinguistic processes to shape perception, interpretation, and emotional response in official correspondence. Particular attention is given to how these mechanisms are manifested in the context of Kazakhstan's public administration, where evolving communication practices and institutional reforms highlight the practical significance of conflict-sensitive language use.

1. Authority, Modality, and Cognitive Threat Perception

Government communication operates within a framework of institutional authority. However, psycholinguistic research indicates that exposure to strong modal expressions (e.g., "must", "failure to comply", "is strictly required") activates cognitive threat appraisal, particularly in asymmetrical power relationships (Kahneman, 2011). When recipients perceive limited agency, they rely more heavily on heuristic processing, which heightens sensitivity to tone and framing (Bavel et al., 2022).

In governmental correspondence, categorical modality without contextual explanation may therefore be interpreted as coercive rather than procedural. This effect is amplified when directives are not accompanied by justification or acknowledgment of citizen perspective. Research in public administration consistently shows that explanatory framing increases perceived procedural fairness and institutional trust (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2017; Tyler, 2006). Thus, conflictogenicity often emerges not from authority itself, but from authority that is presented without explanation of its rationale, legal basis, or intended purpose.

2. Attribution Bias and Implicit Blame in Administrative Language

A second mechanism concerns attribution processes. Linguistic constructions such as "non-compliance", "violation", or "failure to submit documentation" foreground negative outcomes while obscuring contextual factors. Experimental evidence demonstrates that grammatical framing shapes perceptions of intentionality and blame (Fausey and Boroditsky, 2011). In administrative contexts, such constructions may be legally precise but psychologically interpreted as moral judgment.

This dynamic is particularly relevant in governance systems undergoing public trust consolidation. Studies show that when citizens perceive unjust blame, institutional trust declines even if decisions are procedurally valid (Porumbescu, 2017). Therefore, the repeated use of negative nominalisations in official correspondence may cumulatively reinforce adversarial perception of state institutions.

3. Institutional Distance and Relational Deficit

Administrative discourse traditionally favours impersonal formulations ("the authority has determined", "the decision has been made"). While this structure maintains formal neutrality, it may inadvertently increase perceived institutional distance. Psycholinguistic research

suggests that relational cues — such as acknowledgment, perspective-taking, and clarity of agency — regulate cooperative interpretation. When such cues are absent, recipients are more likely to infer indifference or bureaucratic rigidity.

Empirical studies in governance communication demonstrate that relational transparency strengthens perceived legitimacy (Van Noordt and Misuraca, 2020). Conversely, formulaic responses lacking individualised explanation may trigger frustration and escalation, especially in sensitive cases involving complaints, sanctions, or benefit denial.

4. Evidence from Kazakhstan: Communication Competence and Escalation Risk

The Kazakhstani context provides empirical support for these theoretical mechanisms. Recent large-scale studies of civil servants in Kazakhstan identify persistent gaps in communicative competencies, particularly in crisis communication, audience adaptation, and empathetic framing (Bokayev et al., 2024a; Bokayev et al., 2024b). Survey findings involving thousands of public officials indicate that administrative correspondence frequently prioritises formal compliance over clarity and relational balance.

Scholars analysing public administration curricula in Kazakhstan further observe that communicative training remains underemphasised relative to legal and procedural instruction (Iskindirova et al., 2024). As a result, officials may rely heavily on standardised bureaucratic templates that contain precisely the linguistic markers identified as conflictogenic: rigid modality, depersonalisation, and implicit blame structures.

These findings align with broader research on public trust in Kazakhstan, which suggests that citizen perceptions of government institutions are strongly influenced by communication style and responsiveness. Where feedback mechanisms are weak or messages appear formulaic, perceived legitimacy declines. In such environments, even neutral administrative language can be interpreted as dismissive.

Importantly, Kazakhstan's multilingual administrative environment introduces additional interpretative sensitivity. Variations in tone and modality between Kazakh and Russian versions of official texts may alter perceived severity or relational stance. This linguistic complexity further underscores the importance of deliberate, conflict-aware drafting practices.

5. Digital Amplification and Reputational Implications

In contemporary governance, official correspondence no longer remains private. Citizens frequently share responses through digital platforms, transforming individual interactions into publicly scrutinised discourse. Research on collective emotional dynamics shows that negative interpretations spread rapidly within networked environments (Bavel et al., 2022). Consequently, micro-level linguistic choices may produce macro-level reputational consequences.

For Kazakhstan, where digital public engagement is expanding, this amplification effect increases the strategic importance of communicative precision. Conflict-generating formulations may not only escalate individual disputes but also shape broader narratives about governmental legitimacy.

6. Integrative Interpretation

Across international and Kazakhstani contexts, the evidence converges on a central insight: conflictogenicity in official correspondence is a psycholinguistic phenomenon embedded in institutional practice. It arises when administrative language activates cognitive threat

perception, intensifies attribution bias, increases social distance, and reduces procedural fairness cues.

Mitigating such risks does not require abandoning legal rigor or institutional authority. Rather, it demands strategic recalibration of linguistic framing. Explanatory elaboration, moderated modality, transparent agency attribution, and relational acknowledgment represent evidence-based tools for reducing escalation while preserving formal correctness.

For government officials, this implies that communication training should incorporate psycholinguistic awareness as a professional competency. In governance systems such as Kazakhstan's, where institutional trust continues to evolve, linguistically informed administrative communication may serve as a practical instrument for strengthening legitimacy and constructive state–citizen interaction.

CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates that conflict-generating formulations in official governmental correspondence arise from the interaction between institutional language conventions and psycholinguistic processing mechanisms. Authority markers, categorical modality, implicit blame structures, and depersonalised institutional voice may activate cognitive threat perception, intensify attribution bias, and increase perceived social distance, particularly under conditions of power asymmetry.

Integrating psycholinguistic insights with governance communication research reveals that communicative legitimacy depends not only on legal correctness but also on relational framing and procedural transparency. Evidence from Kazakhstan reinforces this conclusion, indicating that gaps in communicative competencies among civil servants and reliance on rigid bureaucratic templates may inadvertently amplify escalation risks.

Importantly, conflict mitigation does not require weakening institutional authority. Rather, it requires strategic recalibration of linguistic framing. Explanatory elaboration, moderated modality, transparent agency attribution, and acknowledgment of citizen perspective enhance perceived fairness while preserving formal neutrality. Additionally, in digitally mediated governance systems, where official correspondence may circulate beyond its initial context, the reputational consequences of linguistic choices become increasingly significant. Embedding psycholinguistic awareness into public administration training and drafting standards may therefore serve as a practical mechanism for strengthening institutional trust.

Future research may empirically test the proposed framework through experimental studies or corpus-based analysis of administrative texts. Such interdisciplinary inquiry would further refine models of conflict-sensitive official communication applicable to transitional and multilingual governance contexts.

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