

THE MAGIC OF THREE IN LEGAL DISCOURSE: THE ART OF PERSUASION IN THE COURTROOM

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Summary

Modern courtroom rhetoric demands optimal structural framework to maximise the persuasiveness of argumentation under conditions of extreme information overload and emotional stress. This study provides a comprehensive pragmalinguistic analysis of the three-part compositional model as an instrument of strategic persuasion and refutation within polemical legal discourse. Grounded in linguopragmatics and discourse analysis, the research utilises contextual, semantic, and compositional-stylistic methods to examine how legal professionals transform neutral linguistic resources into emotionally evaluative tools. The empirical data comprises the closing arguments and judicial transcripts from the high-profile Paul J. Caneiro Trial (2026).

The findings demonstrate that structural triads are rooted in human pattern recognition, functioning as the minimal numerical value required to establish cognitive equilibrium and systemic finality in court. The analysis reveals how the prosecution successfully realised three distinct triadic structures to achieve an unassailable perlocutionary effect. Conversely, the defense attempted to break these patterns by fragmenting the state's triadic pillars of proof.

Integrating linguistic transformations with a three-part compositional model turns normative legal logic into a psychologically compelling mechanism of complete victory.

Key words: a three-part compositional model, polemical legal discourse, rule of three, courtroom rhetoric, linguopragmatics, perlocutionary effect, Paul Caneiro trial.

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1. Introduction

In modern linguopragmatics, a text is viewed not as a static form, but as a living, dynamic process of communication determined by psychological, rhetorical, and social factors (*Peleepey-chenko, & Zaitseva, 2022*). In the legal sphere, this process transforms into legal discourse, one of the most striking and aggressive forms of which is courtroom discourse. Judicial debates, witness interrogation, and the drafting of appellate claims all constitute a communicative space of the “clash of oppositions.” In all courtroom speeches, the speaker realises two main pragmatic goals: to persuade (the court, the jury) and to refute (the position of the procedural opponent) (*Zaitseva, 2024*). To achieve the maximum perlocutionary effect (a real impact on the judge's decision), a lawyer needs a special structure. The best tool for building such a structure is a three-part compositional model.

The relevance of the study is the need for a comprehensive investigation of the mechanisms of speech impact in professional fields of communication, particularly in courtroom rhetoric, where the cost of a communicative error is extremely high. Also, there is a growing need to analyse how abstract linguistic resources and classical compositional models (such as

triads) adapt to the rigid framework of modern legal discourse to achieve specific illocutionary and perlocutionary goals.

The purpose of the research paper is to provide a theoretical substantiation and practical analysis of the specifics of the functioning of the three-part compositional model as an instrument of pragmatic impact and structuring of argumentation within polemical legal discourse. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to solve the following **tasks**:

1. To define the linguopragmatic characteristics of polemical legal discourse.
2. To study the cognitive-psychological foundations of the “Rule of Three” in the context of information perception by the court and the jury.
3. To analyse, using specific examples of trials (in particular, the high-profile case of Paul Caneiro), the mechanisms of implementing the pragmatic functions of the word through tripartite compositional models.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in the fact that it conceptualises for the first time the integration of the classical rhetorical structural triad and modern pragmalinguistic approaches to the analysis of courtroom discourse. New material is introduced into the work – Paul Caneiro Trial (February 2026), viewed through the prism of the theory of semantic transformations and the pragmatic potential of language resources in a courtroom dispute.

Methodology and methods of research. The methodological basis of the research consists of the core tenets of discourse analysis, linguopragmatics, and forensic rhetoric. In the course of the study, a complex of complementary scientific methods was used, namely, the method of discourse analysis (to identify the socio-cultural and contextual features of judicial speech); pragmatic analysis (to assess the speaker's intentions and the perlocutionary effect of the text); the method of contextual and semantic analysis (to study the transformation of neutral vocabulary into emotionally evaluative language); compositional and stylistic analysis (to investigate structural triads and rhetorical models in the texts of the closing arguments).

2. The Psychology of legal persuasion

A courtroom trial is a situation of high stress and information overload. Judges and jurors are forced to listen to vast amounts of data: statutory laws, testimonies, and expert evaluations. The human brain is structured to look for patterns, and three is the minimum number of elements required to establish a recognisable structure. In this vein, a single argument in court looks isolated and weak; two arguments merely create contrast or doubt (one word against another); three arguments form a system of evidence that is perceived as logically complete, balanced, and objective.

If a defense attorney or a prosecutor presents four or five arguments, the court's attention scatters. The legal truth gets lost in details, and the listener's brain begins to confuse the facts. Roman jurists rightly relied on the principle of “*omne trium perfectum*” (everything that comes in threes is perfect).

3. Functions of the legal word and the pragmatics of evidence

Polemical courtroom discourse is obviously anthropocentric: a lawyer connects the dry letter of the law with a real-life situation and provides it with their own legal evaluation. The word in the mouth of a lawyer performs three crucial functions identified in discourse theory: communicating content (stating the case facts, evidence, and clues); expressing a vision

(interpretation of events, qualification of a crime or offense); evaluating a phenomenon (the pragmatic aspect: demanding punishment, acquittal, or restoration of justice).

To realise the pragmatic potential of language resources at 100%, lawyers use semantic transformations. For instance, in criminal trials, neutral words acquire a powerful emotionally evaluative subtext within the context. However, to prevent this “emotionality” from looking like empty demagoguery, it is subordinated to the “Rule of Three”: three main theses of the prosecution or defense, each supported by three pieces of evidence (e.g., witness testimony, expert opinion, physical evidence).

4. Different triads in courtroom rhetoric

Let's start with a compositional one. The interaction between a lawyer and the audience (the court) is always a two-way process. A lawyer models the image of an ideal addressee (a fair, impartial judge) and builds their speech according to strict compositional models. Let us consider the classical tripartite structure of a legal speech which includes introduction attracting the court's attention, briefly summarising the essence of the case, creating the initial pragmatic effect; body deploying three key arguments, refuting the opponent's arguments (“the opposition of oppositions”); conclusion summarising the legal position, delivering the final emotionally evaluative impact on the court.

Going further than this, let's dissect so called the “Tell Them, Prove It, Reiterate” formula or, in other words, the rhetorical loop. This method is indispensable in a jury trial: It includes thesis that clearly states what the defendant is innocent (or guilty) of; argumentation that presents three lines of evidence, using both rational and expressive language resources; and summary that repeats the main thesis, now enriched by the proven base, cementing it in the minds of the jurors before they leave for the deliberation room.

Then we want to analyse a chronological framing (Past – Present – Future). A lawyer builds a speech by appealing to three temporal layers: the Past for reconstruction of the offense; the Present for legal qualification of the act, current trial; the Future for preventing injustice in the future.

The theoretical models of triadic persuasion cease to be mere abstract linguistic concepts when deployed in a high-stakes courtroom environment. To evaluate how these compositional, formulaic, and chronological triads operate in contemporary legal practice, we must turn to a concrete legal battlefield.

The high-profile trial of Paul Caneiro, which culminated in February 2026, serves as a pristine case study for this linguistic dissection. Facing severe charges of arson and the murder of his own brother's family, Caneiro's trial forced both the prosecution and the defense to deploy the absolute limits of their rhetorical arsenals. Because the case heavily relied on a complex web of financial motives, digital forensics, and deep emotional trauma, the attorneys could not rely on raw facts alone; they had to structure those facts perfectly to win the minds of the jury.

By analysing the transcripts, opening statements, and closing arguments of *The Trial of Paul Caneiro*, we can observe exactly how that three-part compositional model was weaponized to transform chaotic evidence into a compelling, persuasive narrative. Let us examine the practical implementation of these triads sequentially.

5. The three-part compositional model in action

The case of Paul Caneiro, whose trial concluded in New Jersey in February 2026, is a textbook and chilling example of a brutal crime where the prosecution and the defense clashed in the courtroom. Paul Caneiro was accused (and on February 13, 2026, found guilty on all 15 counts) of murdering his brother Keith, his wife, and their two children, as well as torching their mansion and his own home to conceal evidence.

Analysing the closing arguments of this trial through the prism of polemical discourse theory and the “Rule of Three” provides convincing illustrations of how lawyers use these tools in practice.

5.1. The Prosecution's use of the “Rule of Three”

In his closing argument, First Assistant Prosecutor Christopher Becker faced the need to tie together a huge array of circumstantial evidence (video recordings, DNA, ballistics, financial documents). To structure this chaos, the prosecution resorted to classical triads.

The prosecutor reduced Paul Caneiro's complex financial fraud to three clear steps for the jury:

1. Deception: Paul had been secretly embezzling from the family business and trusts for years.
2. Discovery: His brother Keith discovered the theft and, the day before the murder, sent Paul a letter terminating payments.
3. Destruction: The only way out for Paul was the physical elimination of his brother and his family to obtain a \$1.5 million insurance payout.

Then the prosecution masterfully built a chronological chain, proving that the defendant's actions were a cold-blooded plan, not an accident. The prosecutor broke down the “alibi triad” literally minute by minute:

- *Paul turns off his home security cameras at 1:28 am (preparation).*
- *He commits the murders and sets fire to his brother's house in Colts Neck, then returns and sets fire to his own house at 5:01 am to divert suspicion (realisation).*
- *He then tells the police that he is a victim whom enemies also tried to burn alive (an attempt to avoid punishment in the future) (Becker, 2026).*

5.2. The Defense attorneys' use of the “Rule of Three”

Paul Caneiro's defense – Monica Dooner Macaluso and Andy Murray – built their strategy on the principle of “the opposition of oppositions,” attempting to destroy the prosecution's pragmatic effect. The main goal of the defense in a polemic is to make the jury doubt.

As noted in linguistic studies of polemics, the author always constructs a specific image (Zaitseva, 2014). The defense tried to impose on the jury the image of Paul as a “loving brother and uncle” who wept during the hearings (particularly during the reading of the forensic results of his 11-year-old nephew). The attorneys used the polemical technique of shifting the focus: they argued that the police had found “the wrong guy” and ignored other theories, including the potential involvement of a third brother, Corey.

Moving to the triad of evidence in attempting to break the prosecution's logical pattern, the defense argued that:

- *The video of Paul's Porsche Macan on the roads was blurry and did not prove he was at the wheel.*
- *The DNA in Paul's basement could have ended up there accidentally due to frequent family visits.*
- *The fire at his own house was a real attack on him, not a staged alibi (Mastellone, 2026)*

5.3. The Final perlocutionary effect and the Judge's ruling

The prosecution's polemical discourse proved structurally stronger. Prosecutor Becker did not just list facts; he appealed to the jurors' emotions through rhetorical questions: *"What kind of person is capable of killing his own brother's family?"*. This created the very additional pragmatic meaning that did not stem from dry ballistic expertise but delivered a powerful psychological blow.

It took the jury only about 4 hours to return a guilty verdict on all 15 counts. And in May 2026, Judge Marc Lemieux put an end to the trial, using a stark verbal triad when pronouncing the sentence:

"You are a quadruple murderer who ruthlessly destroyed innocent children. This is your identity. Your address will forever be prison" (Lemieux, 2026).

The judge sentenced him to four life terms without the possibility of parole, fully securing the prosecution's pragmatic goal.

6. Conclusion

Legal discourse is not just a dry exchange of legal norms; it is a highly pragmatic, emotionally charged polemic. Success in court depends on how effectively a lawyer uses language resources to achieve their illocutionary goal – persuading the court.

The combination of linguistic transformations with the architecture of the "Rule of Three" allows a lawyer to bring order to a chaos of facts. Triads make judicial speech structurally stable, legally flawless, and psychologically compelling for perception, turning normative logic into a genuine weapon of victory.

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