



## LANGUAGE AS A DIPLOMATIC TOOL: ANALYZING THE ROLE OF BAHASA INDONESIA IN GLOBAL LEGAL NEGOTIATIONS

### BAHASA SEBAGAI ALAT DIPLOMASI: ANALISIS PERAN BAHASA INDONESIA DALAM NEGOSIASI HUKUM GLOBAL

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62567/ijosse.v1i2.1192>

#### Abstract

This study explores how Bahasa Indonesia operates as a diplomatic instrument in global legal negotiations, positioning it as a culturally embedded yet strategically functional tool in the international legal arena. Using doctrinal legal research, the article examines treaties, legal frameworks, and diplomatic practices involving Indonesia to uncover the mechanisms through which language contributes to legal engagement and negotiation. The findings underscore the role of Bahasa Indonesia not only as a medium of communication but also as a conveyor of legal identity, national values, and negotiation strategy. The research concludes that linguistic representation in international law fosters legal pluralism and enhances the legitimacy and inclusiveness of global legal norms.

**Keywords :** Bahasa Indonesia, Legal Negotiation, International Law, Diplomacy, Multilingualism

#### Abstrak

Studi ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana Bahasa Indonesia berperan sebagai instrumen diplomatik dalam negosiasi hukum global, dengan memosisikannya sebagai alat yang tertanam secara budaya namun berfungsi secara strategis dalam ranah hukum internasional. Menggunakan metode penelitian hukum doktrinal, artikel ini mengkaji traktat, kerangka hukum, dan praktik diplomatik yang melibatkan Indonesia untuk mengungkap mekanisme di mana bahasa berkontribusi terhadap keterlibatan dan negosiasi hukum. Temuan penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa Bahasa Indonesia tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai media komunikasi, tetapi juga sebagai pembawa identitas hukum, nilai-nilai nasional, dan strategi negosiasi. Penelitian ini



menyimpulkan bahwa representasi linguistik dalam hukum internasional mendorong pluralisme hukum serta meningkatkan legitimasi dan inklusivitas norma-norma hukum global.

**Kata Kunci :** Bahasa Indonesia, Negosiasi Hukum, Hukum Internasional, Diplomasi, Multilingualisme

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language, as both a symbolic and practical tool, plays a pivotal role in global diplomacy and legal negotiation. It is not only a means of communication but also a medium through which identities, power relations, and legal interpretations are constructed and conveyed. In the realm of international law, language can dictate the terms of agreements, shape the scope of obligations, and serve as a lens through which legal principles are understood and applied across diverse legal systems. It plays a critical role in facilitating mutual understanding, minimizing ambiguities in legal texts, and ensuring that all parties in an international agreement operate from a shared conceptual foundation. Language, in this context, becomes more than a vehicle for expression—it becomes a determinant of legal clarity, legitimacy, and trust between nations.

In legal contexts, it shapes interpretations, enforces obligations, and influences dispute resolution outcomes (Tomuschat, 2017). The interpretation of a single legal term can vary across linguistic boundaries, often resulting in disputes or misunderstandings in international negotiations. Legal terminology, especially when translated from one language to another, carries cultural and jurisdictional connotations that may not be easily replicated. As such, the language in which legal norms are drafted and negotiated becomes inseparable from the legal content itself. This intersection of language and law highlights the need for multilingual competence in international legal processes, as well as sensitivity to the linguistic nuances that may shape legal outcomes in arbitration, litigation, or treaty enforcement.

For Indonesia—a nation rich in linguistic and cultural diversity—Bahasa Indonesia acts as more than a national unifier; it is a growing diplomatic asset. Indonesia, as the fourth most populous country in the world and the largest economy in Southeast Asia, holds a prominent position in regional diplomacy, particularly within ASEAN. Bahasa Indonesia, standardized and codified since independence, has served not only to unite its archipelagic nation but also to represent Indonesia's identity and values in international settings. Over the past few decades, Indonesia has made concerted efforts to elevate the status of Bahasa Indonesia beyond national borders by promoting its use in international forums, educational exchanges, and regional cooperation mechanisms. This strategic use of the national language reflects Indonesia's broader aspirations to assert cultural sovereignty and influence regional legal norms.

While English, French, and other dominant languages are often used in legal negotiation, the presence of Bahasa Indonesia in regional and global frameworks reveals its growing significance. The increasing appearance of Bahasa Indonesia in legal documents, memoranda of understanding, and official communications—especially within ASEAN treaties and bilateral agreements—demonstrates its evolving role. It is no longer merely translated as an afterthought but is increasingly considered a co-equal language in drafting and negotiation. This trend is also supported by Indonesia's soft power strategies, including language diplomacy programs and international scholarships promoting the study of Bahasa Indonesia. These



efforts collectively enhance the visibility and legitimacy of the language within international legal and diplomatic spheres.

This paper seeks to analyze how Bahasa Indonesia operates as a diplomatic tool within the sphere of international legal negotiations. The goal is to uncover how a national language, often viewed as peripheral in global legal contexts, can exert influence through its strategic use by state actors. By focusing on case studies, treaty texts, and diplomatic practices, the paper provides an in-depth analysis of language as a legal actor in its own right.

It examines the strategic use of language by Indonesian diplomats and legal representatives, evaluates the role of Bahasa Indonesia in treaty-making, and investigates its influence in legal translation, cultural diplomacy, and institutional representation. This includes assessing the advantages of using Bahasa Indonesia in legal negotiations with culturally or linguistically similar countries, identifying common pitfalls in legal translation and interpretation, and exploring how the language serves as a cultural marker in multilateral diplomacy. The analysis also pays close attention to moments where Bahasa Indonesia played a decisive role in shaping legal understanding or influencing policy decisions within international organizations.

The study also reflects on the challenges faced in integrating Bahasa Indonesia into global legal discourse and proposes strategic pathways for its broader recognition. It considers structural barriers, such as the dominance of colonial languages in international law, the lack of certified legal interpreters in Bahasa Indonesia, and the limited availability of legal texts translated into or from the language. Despite these challenges, the study outlines actionable strategies for Indonesia to increase the global footprint of its language—such as expanding language education for foreign diplomats, developing AI-driven legal translation tools, and advocating for Bahasa Indonesia's recognition in more international institutions. Through these efforts, Bahasa Indonesia could transition from a regional linguistic power to a more pronounced actor in shaping global legal negotiations.

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

The study applies a doctrinal legal methodology, focusing on the analysis of legal texts, treaties, and diplomatic documents where Bahasa Indonesia has been used or referenced. Primary legal materials, including bilingual treaties, multilingual agreements, and official communications between states, form the core sources. These are complemented by secondary sources such as academic publications on international law, language in diplomacy, and Indonesia's legal history.

Analytical frameworks include legal hermeneutics and comparative linguistic analysis. These methods support the interpretation of legal language in multilingual contexts, uncovering both explicit and implicit functions of Bahasa Indonesia in shaping legal meaning. The research refrains from empirical methods and remains grounded in textual analysis to provide a focused legal-theoretical discussion.



### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 1. Bahasa Indonesia in Regional and Bilateral Legal Negotiations

Indonesia's active engagement in regional diplomacy, particularly through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), offers robust evidence of Bahasa Indonesia's strategic function in legal negotiations. As a founding member of ASEAN, Indonesia has continuously promoted linguistic equity and cultural representation within multilateral legal instruments. A prime example is the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), where Bahasa Indonesia is explicitly acknowledged as one of the equally authoritative versions alongside English and other ASEAN languages (Alam et al., 2022). This official recognition affirms not only Indonesia's diplomatic leverage but also the legal value attributed to its national language.

Bilateral treaties involving linguistically and culturally similar nations, such as Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, and Timor-Leste, further reinforce this trend. These countries share mutual intelligibility with Bahasa Indonesia due to linguistic heritage and historical ties, allowing for smoother legal drafting, negotiation, and interpretation when using the language. In such cases, legal agreements are often crafted in both parties' national languages, with Bahasa Indonesia frequently serving as a linguistic bridge and cultural reference point. This practice minimizes ambiguities, promotes mutual respect, and enhances legal coherence.

Moreover, Bahasa Indonesia has played a pivotal role in regional frameworks such as the ASEAN Charter, memoranda of understanding (MoUs), and environmental or maritime agreements where Indonesia's legal and diplomatic input is substantial. The language's usage facilitates not only accessibility for Indonesian negotiators but also reinforces Indonesia's position as a cultural and legal norm-setter within the ASEAN legal ecosystem. These efforts also signal a broader shift toward regional multilingualism, challenging the traditional dominance of English in international legal drafting and fostering a more inclusive negotiation environment.

#### 2. Translation as Legal Strategy

Translation in legal diplomacy is far from a neutral or mechanical activity—it is inherently strategic and deeply consequential. The act of translating legal texts, particularly treaties and international agreements, involves interpreting not only words but also legal concepts, normative frameworks, and cultural meanings. When Bahasa Indonesia is used in the original or co-authored drafts of such documents, accurate and contextually sensitive translation into dominant legal languages such as English, French, or Spanish becomes critical to preserve legal intent and ensure enforceability (Moser, 2024).

For instance, terms deeply rooted in Indonesian legal culture such as *musyawarah* (deliberation based on consensus) or *hukum adat* (customary law) often defy direct equivalents in Western legal systems. Translators and legal drafters must act as cultural and legal mediators, ensuring that the translations do not strip these concepts of their communal or spiritual dimensions, which are vital in Indonesian jurisprudence. Failure to preserve such meanings



may result in misinterpretation of legal obligations, unequal enforcement of agreements, or even diplomatic misunderstandings.

Furthermore, the interpretative weight of translated legal texts can influence dispute resolution outcomes in arbitration or litigation. In international legal proceedings, tribunals often rely on original language versions to resolve ambiguities or inconsistencies. Therefore, investing in high-quality, certified legal translations is not only a matter of linguistic clarity but a strategic necessity for protecting national interests. Indonesia's long-term diplomatic success in legal forums depends, in part, on its ability to produce legally precise, culturally faithful translations that reflect its normative legal identity.

In addition, emerging technological tools and AI-powered translation platforms offer both promise and peril. While these innovations may accelerate the translation process, they also risk oversimplifying complex legal constructs. As such, a hybrid approach—combining technological tools with human legal expertise—is essential for preserving the integrity of Bahasa Indonesia in international legal discourse.

### 3. Legal Identity and National Positioning

Indonesia's use of Bahasa Indonesia in international legal and diplomatic forums functions not only as a communication strategy but also as a powerful assertion of legal identity, sovereignty, and cultural pride. In multilateral gatherings such as ASEAN summits, UN General Assembly sessions, or global environmental negotiations, Indonesian leaders frequently open their speeches or interventions in Bahasa Indonesia before transitioning into a working language like English. This deliberate linguistic code-switching serves as a symbolic gesture that affirms Indonesia's cultural and constitutional foundations while simultaneously aligning with global diplomatic protocols.

Such practices highlight the strategic duality of Bahasa Indonesia's diplomatic use—it signals respect for international norms while maintaining national authenticity. The presence of Bahasa Indonesia in these spaces challenges the dominance of colonial or hegemonic languages in international law and introduces an alternative linguistic paradigm grounded in Southeast Asian legal and cultural thought. This is particularly meaningful in postcolonial contexts where language becomes a vehicle of decolonization and cultural resistance.

Indonesia's consistent linguistic positioning contributes to the projection of soft power, enhancing its diplomatic image as a nation that values its heritage while engaging confidently on the world stage. Bahasa Indonesia, in this regard, becomes more than a national language; it becomes a badge of international legitimacy. Furthermore, by using Bahasa in official communications and press releases during high-level bilateral and multilateral negotiations, Indonesia reinforces the idea that legal sovereignty includes the right to linguistic self-determination.

In long-term diplomatic relations, especially with countries where Bahasa Indonesia is studied or spoken, such as Australia, Timor-Leste, or the Netherlands, this linguistic



positioning also opens pathways for people-to-people diplomacy, educational exchange, and legal capacity-building. These efforts collectively elevate the global perception of Bahasa Indonesia as a language of law, governance, and cooperation.

#### 4. Legal Norm Transfer through Language

Bahasa Indonesia is not simply a medium through which international legal concepts are domesticated into Indonesian law—it is increasingly becoming a conduit for exporting Indonesia's own legal philosophies into regional and global frameworks. One notable example is the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, which incorporates values such as social harmony, collective rights, and cultural context—principles that strongly resonate with Indonesia's Pancasila ideology and customary legal traditions (Elvardi et al., 2022).

By using Bahasa Indonesia in negotiation processes and contributing drafts grounded in national legal logic, Indonesian diplomats and legal advisors are able to influence the normative language of international agreements. This extends to issues such as human rights, environmental protection, and maritime governance, where regional treaties often reflect a non-Western orientation rooted in community-based values and interdependence—an outlook championed by Indonesia.

This form of legal norm transfer through language represents a subtle yet significant form of legal diplomacy. It challenges the idea that international law must always conform to Western legal traditions and instead opens space for pluralistic legal expressions. Bahasa Indonesia plays a key role in this transformation, as it carries with it a repository of legal, moral, and spiritual values that are distinct from Euro-American frameworks.

Additionally, the integration of Bahasa Indonesia into regional training programs, legal education, and academic discourse fosters long-term norm diffusion, allowing Indonesia's legal values to be understood, respected, and potentially adopted by neighboring countries. In this sense, the use of Bahasa Indonesia in legal negotiation is not just about linguistic inclusion—it is about strategic legal influence through culturally resonant language.

#### 5. Strategic Gaps and Future Potential

Despite the advances outlined above, the use of Bahasa Indonesia in international legal negotiations remains predominantly regional in scope, with limited global institutional recognition. Unlike languages such as Arabic, Chinese, French, Spanish, or Russian, Bahasa Indonesia has not been formally recognized as a working language in major global institutions like the United Nations, World Trade Organization (WTO), or International Criminal Court. This restricts the language's visibility and influence in the creation of global legal norms and policies.

Several structural barriers contribute to this limitation. These include the scarcity of certified legal translators and interpreters, the absence of standardized legal glossaries, and the limited digital infrastructure for Bahasa Indonesia in legal databases and AI systems. These





gaps hinder Indonesia's ability to scale up its language diplomacy and weaken the institutional pathways through which Bahasa Indonesia could gain broader legal legitimacy.

However, these challenges also present important opportunities for strategic intervention. The advancement of AI and machine learning in legal translation (Okwong & Vivekanandam, 2024), coupled with increased demand for multilingual legal expertise in the global South, creates a favorable environment for Indonesia to invest in the technological modernization of its language diplomacy. This includes developing legal translation software, building corpora of bilingual legal texts, and establishing training centers for multilingual legal professionals.

Indonesia could also intensify its lobbying efforts for the inclusion of Bahasa Indonesia as an official or auxiliary working language in selected UN agencies or regional legal bodies such as the Asian-African Legal Consultative Organization (AALCO). Furthermore, scholarship programs and language learning initiatives targeting foreign legal practitioners, diplomats, and students can help build global capacity for the use of Bahasa Indonesia in international law.

In the long term, these strategies would not only strengthen Indonesia's diplomatic leverage but also contribute to a more linguistically inclusive and legally pluralist international system, where voices from the Global South are represented not only in content but also in the languages through which global law is written and interpreted.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Bahasa Indonesia has evolved into a strategic diplomatic tool within the regional legal negotiation landscape. Its use affirms national identity, promotes legal values, and bridges cultural gaps in international diplomacy. However, its potential is still underutilized in global legal forums.

To elevate its role, Indonesia must institutionalize legal translation frameworks, train multilingual legal experts, and advocate for Bahasa Indonesia's inclusion in international legal mechanisms. As global diplomacy gradually embraces linguistic diversity, Bahasa Indonesia is well-positioned to contribute meaningfully to legal pluralism and the decolonization of international law.

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