"I hereby and herein claim liberties": Identity and Power in Sovereign Citizen Pseudolegal Courtroom Filings

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ABSTRACT

While the documents produced by members of the Sovereign Citizen movement are not legitimate legal documents, there is a distinctly legal character to them. This article examines the ways that Sovereign Citizen pseudolegal documents acquire that legal-seeming character by considering the degree to which the language present in them resembles that of documents written by actual attorneys. A comparison of a corpus of Sovereign Citizen documents filed in an American courthouse to a corpus of attorney-authored documents obtained from that same courthouse reveals that the authors of the pseudolegal courtroom filings (PCFs) examined are generally adept at identifying those features of legitimate courtroom filings (LCFs) that most clearly differentiate them from documents written in more "general" varieties of English. These Sovereign Citizen authors do more than simply imitate, however; they frequently heighten or in some way emphasize those features of LCFs that appear to them to be the most legally or authoritatively salient. By considering both the features of LCFs that have been heightened in this way and those features of PCFs that have no immediately clear legitimate legal analogue, several trends become apparent: 1) PCFs are highly and perhaps primarily concerned with establishing the identity and power of their authors as individuals; 2) PCFs frame judges and other representatives of the legitimate legal system as a single collective out-group; and 3) PCFs present their authors as the wielders of true legal authority while simultaneously, if implicitly, acknowledging the real-world power that the legitimate legal system wields over them.

Keywords: Sovereign Citizens, Pseudolaw, Linguistics, Forensic Linguistics, Language and Law, Legal Language

I.   Introduction

The Sovereign Citizen movement is a collection of loosely organized anti-government conspiracy theorists found around the world. Despite the movement's origins with a group of far-right white nationalists in the United States in the 1960s (Fenster, 2008, pp. 55-56; Sullivan, 1999, p. 787), Sovereign Citizen groups can now be found in "at least" 26 different countries with members from a variety of racial and political backgrounds (Pitcavage, 2016; Sarteschi 2022). Broadly speaking, Sovereign Citizens believe that through the filing of certain forms and the raising of certain arguments in court, they can force the legal system and its representatives to do (or not do) anything they desire, including give them access to secret government funds or dismiss criminal charges against them (Griffin, 2022, p. ii; Sarteschi, 2023a, p. 2). While the Sovereign Citizen movement has received notable attention from lawyers (e.g., Kalinowski IV, 2019; Netolitzky & Warman, 2020; Sullivan, 1999), historians (e.g., Berger, 2016; Pitcavage, 2016), and religious studies scholars (e.g. Dew, 2015; Wessinger, 1999) alike, it has until recently gone largely unnoticed by linguists. For years, the only discussion of the movement in linguistic literature seems to have been a brief aside by the lawyer-linguist Peter Tiersma (1999, pp. 212–213) in which he mentioned the Montana Freemen and their habit of:

> prepar[ing] verbose legal filings to various state and federal courts, dressed up in 'pseudo-scholarly terms and meaningless Latin phrases,' typically claiming for various reasons courts have no jurisdiction over them.

More recently, Marko (2020) performed a close reading of the "constitution" of the "Austrian Commonwealth" Sovereign Citizen group and Heffer (2020, pp. 201–202), as part of a wider discussion about the nature of untruthfulness, classified Sovereign Citizen pseudolegal texts as instances of "pseudo-legal poppycock," which he defines as an "epistemically irresponsible discourse pathology" that uses "the style of an established discourse type" while presenting information "not appropriate for that discourse type." It was not until Griffin (2022), however, that there was any in-depth consideration of the specific language used by the Sovereign Citizen movement. This article presents the findings of that PhD thesis as they relate to manifestations of identity and power in the language used in a set of Sovereign Citizen pseudolegal texts, how that language compares to the language present in texts written by actual attorneys, and what the implications of that relationship are for the study of pseudolaw more generally.

II.   Literature Review

The field of linguistics that examines language in legal contexts is often referred to as "forensic linguistics." The term first appeared in Svartvik (1968), but it was not until 1994, with the founding of the journal *Forensic Linguistics: The International Journal of Speech, Language and the Law* that the term was adopted by the wider academic community (Coulthard, 1994, p. 27; Larner, 2015, p. 131).[1] Today, "forensic linguistics" is often used as an umbrella term for what are really two distinct but related areas of research: one that examines the use of language in the

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[1] The journal has since dropped "Forensic Linguistics" from its title, but the term is still used to describe the field as a whole.

legal system and another that is related to the provision of expert linguistic evidence in courtrooms or comparable legal settings (see, e.g., the section divisions in Coulthard et al. (2017) and Shuy (2017), that divide the field along these lines). Studies in the former area, such as Griffin (2022) and therefore this article, are generally said to be research in "language and law" (Finegan, 2015, p. 56; International Association for Forensic and Legal Linguistics, 2023).

Even in its broadest sense, forensic linguistics is a relatively young field, and the subfield of language and law perhaps even more so. This fact at least in part explains why, despite the Sovereign Citizen movement being known for its many distinctive writing habits (see e.g., Anti-Defamation League, 2016) and its clear connection to the language used in the legal system, Sovereign Citizen discourse has gone largely unexamined by linguists until now: there are still broader, more fundamental questions about language and law that have yet to be answered. The nature of the difference between the variety of English used in legal contexts ("legal English") and more everyday varieties of English ("standard English")--a subject of critical importance when examining the writings of a pseudolegal conspiracy group such as the Sovereign Citizen movement--remains surprisingly unsettled. The lawyer David Mellinkoff (1963/2004) made the first notable attempt to distinguish the two and, though his was not a linguistically-grounded description, it remains hugely influential. While subsequent work that has examined legal English (e.g., Kurzon, 1997; Mattila, 2012; Tiersma, 2006) has added a more linguistic perspective, there has not as yet been a substantial and empirically-grounded attempt to identify the differences between legal English and standard English. In general, though, some of the more frequently observed qualities of legal English relative to standard English (referred to as "consensus" features below) include a less frequent use of pronouns both within and across sentences (Solan, 1993, pp. 121–122; Tiersma, 2006, pp. 46–47), a more frequent use of negation, particularly multiple negation (e.g. "without which the injury would not have occurred") (R. P. Charrow & Charrow, 1979, pp. 1324–1325; Danet, 1985, p. 283), and a much more frequent use of legal technical terminology (Kurzon, 2013; Mattila, 2012; Tiersma, 2008, p. 14).[2]

In linguistic terms, both legal English and standard English are generally held to be "registers" of English. A register is set of discrete linguistic features that characterize a set of texts, such as the avoidance of contractions or the frequency of pronoun use in formal writing (Conrad, 2015, p. 309; Halliday & Hasan, 1985, p. 41).[3] Register is closely related to the concept of genre, which

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[2] See Griffin (2022, pp. 36–39) for a fuller discussion of the current linguistic consensus surrounding the nature of legal English and some of the issues with that description. For the purposes of the present study, a word is considered to be an instance of legal technical terminology when it has a corresponding entry in the most recent edition of Black's Law Dictionary (Garner, 2019) (Griffin 2022, pp. 39–42).

[3] To avoid a potential source of confusion: the concept of register is distinct from that of dialect. While both terms refer to specific varieties of language use, the former is determined by the context in which language is used (e.g., the language of business meetings) while the latter is determined by the individual using the language (e.g., African American Vernacular English, or AAVE) (Halliday & Hasan, 1985, p. 41).

describes the structural characteristics of a set of texts (e.g., the "Introduction-Methods-Results-Discussion" organization of many scientific articles), the nature of the community that created them, and the purpose for which they were created (Bhatia, 2011, p. 241; Biber, 2010, pp. 241–242). A register often appears across multiple distinct genres. Legal English, for example, is used in both the sorts of legal filings examined in this study and in judicial opinions, both of which could simultaneously be said to belong to a single superordinate "courtroom document" genre. The concept of genre is not limited to a single organizational level. Breeze (2019, p. 81) makes reference to this portable quality of register in her discussion of a "transversal *legal register* that cuts through different genres" (emphasis in original). With this in in mind, Sovereign Citizen pseudolegal texts can be broadly thought of as a genre that copies both the structure and register of legitimate legal texts in an attempt to imbue itself with the authority of those texts.

Science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke once said that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (Clarke, 1983, p. 36) and several commentators (e.g., Dew, 2015; Netolitzky, 2018; Wessinger, 2000) have suggested that Sovereign Citizens seem to view the legal system through a similar lens. This magical explanation of Sovereign Citizen pseudolegal thought goes as follows: Sovereign Citizens are generally individuals who do not have a strong understanding of the structure of the legal system or the way it operates. In their encounters with its representatives (i.e. lawyers, police, judges, etc.) Sovereign Citizens see those representatives perform legal rituals that they do not comprehend and that have dramatic real word effects (e.g., they receive a traffic ticket, are arrested, or have their homes foreclosed upon). Whether consciously or not, because of their lack of understanding (or perhaps because of a willful misunderstanding) of how the legal system functions, Sovereign Citizens conclude that those legal rituals tap into some element of the "supernatural" and decide to attempt to claim that power for themselves to turn it against their oppressors (Wessinger, 1999, p. 38). To bolster their efforts in what they perceive to be a form of magical combat, Sovereign Citizens do not just copy the form of existing legal rituals; instead, they make efforts to enhance what they believe to be its most magically salient features.

Though it may initially seem strange, Sovereign Citizens are far from the first people to make such a connection between magic and the legal system. Law has long been described as a form of "social magic" (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 840; see also Frank, 1949, p. 181) and there are clear parallels between the popularly understood importance of "magic words" and the real and highly publicized instances in which an individual's failure to follow a prescribed legal formula has resulted in significant real world consequences, such as when a suspect's telling the police to "just give me a lawyer dog" was found to be insufficient to invoke his right to counsel (Jackman, 2017) or when Barack Obama had to retake the presidential oath of office after deviating slightly from its constitutionally mandated form during his 2009 inauguration (Zeleny, 2009). Even those who would not otherwise describe the practice of law as inherently magical, including many lawyers, feel that the language used in legal contexts is what actually "carr[ies] the power of the law" (V. R. Charrow et al., 1982, p. 182) and it has been suggested that the general public recognizes legal texts as signs (in the semiotic sense) of the power of the legal system before they process any particular semantic content those texts may contain (Goodrich, 1990, p. 209). Magic as understood for the purposes of this article can be defined as "pertain[ing] generally to human

control over supernatural forces" (O. Davies, 2012, p. 1); that is in many ways similar to Austin's classic positivist definition of law as the "commands of a sovereign" (Bix, 2023).[4] The main difference is that where the sovereign commands their subjects, the magician commands the entirety of the world around them.

One of the most significant theoretical differences between the claims to authority of the representatives of the legitimate legal system and of the Sovereign Citizens is the ultimate source of that authority. In contemporary American society, the power of government is said to stem from the consent of the governed (i.e. the "We the People" of the preamble to the U.S. Constitution). While Sovereign Citizens are often quick to cloak themselves in symbols of American patriotism, as will be discussed below, authority as conceptualized in their pseudolegal documents seems instead to stem from powers inherent to the individual. This article is particularly interested in the implications of that difference for the study of the Sovereign Citizen movement and of pseudolaw more broadly.

It is worth clarifying here that the use of the terms "legitimate" and "pseudolegal," as well as "magical" and "supernatural," in this article is not intended to communicate any sort of moral evaluation; instead, these terms are meant to convey how the documents examined below are viewed from the perspectives of those representing the legal system or belonging to the Sovereign Citizen movement. Texts written by lawyers are deemed "legitimate" because they fit within the parameters that are expected of a document operating in the legal system, while texts written by Sovereign Citizens are "pseudolegal" because they are written in the style of legitimate legal texts while being grounded in theories which the legal system (i.e. the grantor of legitimacy in this context) regards as meritless (Netolitzky, 2023b, p. 2). Similarly, texts written by Sovereign Citizens can be considered "magic" or "supernatural" because, as was discussed above, they are ultimately grounded in a supernatural understanding of the legal system. There are a number of ontological issues that arise when attempting to define a self-regulating field such as law (Harris & Hutton, 2007, pp. 133-156) or, indeed, magic. Fortunately, it is sufficient for present purposes to simply say that something is legal or magical based on its reception by the community that is best situated to deem it so. Notably, a Sovereign Citizen text can be properly considered magic in this way even if its author would not explicitly recognize it as such; the key factor on that front is whether the author was operating in line with the magical view of the legal system outlined above.

III.   Methodology

This study examines the relationship between two intriguingly related sets of documents: Sovereign Citizen pseudolegal courtroom filings ("PCFs") and legitimate courtroom filings ("LCFs"). It does so via a corpus-assisted multimodal discourse analysis ("CAMDA") approach, a combination of linguistic methodologies that involves "a large-scale analysis of relevant semiotic systems using a corpus" and "a detailed, close-reading analysis of selected texts [from that corpus]" (Bednarek & Caple, 2014, p. 151). As the name implies, CAMDA uses corpus linguistic methods to supplement the analysis of multimodal discourse.

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[4] The 18th century positivist legal theorist John Austin should not be confused with the 20th century philosopher of language John Austin, whose speech act theory is discussed below.

Corpus linguistics refers to "that set of studies into the form and/or function of language which incorporate the use of computerised corpora in their analyses" (Partington, 2013, p. 5), where a corpus is "a principled collection of language data taken from real life contexts" (Knight & Adolphs, 2020, p. 353).[5] The use of such quantitative techniques allows a researcher to "[conduct] an empirical analysis of language" (Gries & Paquot, 2020, p. 647) that provides "more neutral starting points and generalizability" of results (Marchi & Taylor, 2018, p. 4) when analyzing data than is generally possible with a purely qualitative study. When the variety of discourse being examined is either un- or under-explored, as is the case with both Sovereign Citizen pseudolegal discourse and the register of legal English more generally, corpus linguistic techniques help a researcher identify features of that discourse that may be particularly distinctive or otherwise important to their analysis. While the term "discourse" is used in different senses in different areas of academia (Baker, 2006, pp. 3–5), for the purposes of this study it can be understood to mean "how language is put to use" (Bednarek & Caple, 2012, p. 2; see also Partington & Marchi, 2015, p. 216). The discourse of PCFs and LCFs is considered "multimodal" because of the way in which both groups of documents integrate meaningful visual elements (e.g., through the use of bolding or the integration of images in addition to text).[6]

To examine the relationship between Sovereign Citizen pseudolegal discourse and legitimate legal discourse, two corpora were created: a corpus of legitimate legal documents filed in court written by actual attorneys (the legitimate courtroom filing or "LCF" corpus) and a corpus of pseudolegal documents filed in court written by Sovereign Citizens (the pseudolegal courtroom filing or "PCF" corpus). The contents of the two corpora are summarized below in Table 1:

Table 1 – Contents of the LCF and PCF corpora

Corpus	Words	Texts	Pages	Cases	Parties
LCF	302,857	138	1,169	24	38
PCF	359,428	250	1,167	42	52
Total	662,285	388	2,336	66	90

The texts that comprise the LCF and PCF corpora were all filed in chancery court in the Circuit Court of Cook County, Illinois in the United States. With very limited exceptions not applicable

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[5] While essentially defining corpus linguistics as "linguistics which makes use as a corpus" may seem at first undesirably circular, it serves to highlight an important point: namely, that "corpus linguistics" refers to a set of quantitative methodological techniques rather than to any particular theory of language (McEnery & Hardie, 2012, pp. 1–3).

[6] Technically this combination of writing and image is "multisemiotic" rather than "multimodal" (with the latter description requiring the combination of multiple perceptual modalities, such as audio and visual components) but it is "general practice" (Bednarek, 2015, p. 66) in linguistics to use the term "multimodal" to refer to both multimodal and multisemiotic content (see, e.g., Malamatidou (2020, p. 85), which defines multimodality "as the combination of two or more semiotic resources (including language) within a particular communication event").

here, all texts filed in court in the United States at both the state and federal level are part of the public record (see 705 ILCS 105/16(6) for the applicable Illinois statute), meaning that there was no legal or ethical issue to the collection of these documents. Nevertheless, all personally identifying information contained in the following examples has been anonymized. The LCF and PCF corpora were designed to be roughly similar in terms of both the wordcount and the number of pages each contained; for more on the ways in which the texts that comprise the two corpora were collected and annotated, see Griffin (2022, pp. 61–77).

To gauge the relative frequency of written features in the LCF corpus as compared to standard English, reference was made to the combined written subcorpora (i.e. all but the "Spoken" and "TV/Movies" subcorpora) of the Corpus of Contemporary American English, or "COCA" (M. Davies, 2008). This portion of COCA, referred to below as COCA-W, totals 746,200,688 words from across six distinct categories (blogs, fiction, magazine, newspaper, academic, and web-general). The written contents of the LCF and PCF corpora were analyzed in AntConc (Anthony, 2019) while their graphic contents (i.e. their use of images, textual emphasis, and layout elements) were analyzed in UAM Image Tool (O'Donnell, 2011), with supplemental calculations in both areas made as necessary in RStudio (RStudio Team, 2020) and Microsoft Excel. Statistical significance was determined via chi-square tests in RStudio using a p-value of 0.01, which has become the standard significance threshold in contemporary corpus linguistics (Gabrielatos, 2018, p. 239; Wallis, 2021, p. 35). In the following section, any column in a table which is labeled "Norm." presents the normalized frequency of the relevant word per 100,000 words; this descriptive statistic allows for a more straightforward comparison of the rate of use of that word between the two corpora by compensating for their different total wordcounts (McEnery & Hardie, 2012, p. 251).

Before preceding to the analysis, it is worth emphasizing that the LCF and PCF corpora both represent relatively narrow contexts of language use. While this article presents a more thorough comparison of the language used in these two genres than currently exists in the literature, this discussion is better considered a starting point than the final word on the subject. While the exclusive use of texts that were filed in chancery court enhances the comparability of the LCF and PCF corpora (McEnery & Hardie, 2012, p. 240), the use of a broader range of legal documents (e.g., by also including filings from criminal court) would likely give more broadly representative results. Similarly, the use of documents from a single urban American courthouse provided by a single informant law clerk may mean that there are other distinctive features of PCF texts which were not identified in this analysis. For example, Canadian Sovereign Citizens groups may have their own distinctive linguistic tendencies (see, e.g., Netolitzky, 2023a; Sarteschi, 2023b), and this author believes that that Moorish Sovereigns are much more common in Cook County than in more rural counties, meaning that they may be overrepresented in the PCF corpus relative to their prominence in the wider Sovereign Citizen movement. For more on the limitations of the analysis in this article, see Griffin (2022, pp. 248-250).

IV.   Analysis

Griffin (2022) was the first quantitative linguistic study of texts belonging to both the LCF and PCF genres. Its findings regarding the use of certain consensus features of legal English relative

to standard English and the relative frequency of those same features between the LCF and PCF corpora are summarized below in Table 2:[7]

Table 2 – Consensus features of legal English in the LCF and PCF corpora with reference to COCA-W

Feature	Consensus	LCF compared to COCA-W	PCF compared to LCF
Overall Negation	More in LCF	No significant difference	No significant difference
└ Minus *n't	More in LCF	Significantly more	No significant difference
Pronouns	Fewer in LCF	Significantly fewer	Significantly more
Passives	More in LCF	Significantly more	No significant difference
Nominalizations	More in LCF	Significantly more	Significantly fewer

A comparison of the "Consensus" and "LCF compared to COCA-W" columns shows that the consensus description of legal English was largely found to be consistent with the frequencies of the examined features between the LCF corpus and COCA-W. The only exception to this was the frequency of overall negation, where the inclusion of the markedly informal contraction *n't meant that there was not a statistically significant difference in its frequency between the two corpora. Excluding *n't from the totals, however, did result in a statistically significantly higher frequency of negation in the LCF corpus as compared to COCA-W. While the lack of a significant difference in the overall frequency of negation between the two corpora suggests that the consensus description of legal English may need some refinement, it was nonetheless deemed to be sufficiently accurate to serve as a starting point for the comparison of LCF and PCF corpora (Griffin, 2022, pp. 96–103).

The "PCF compared to LCF" column in Table 2 shows that Sovereign Citizens are, at least in general terms, adept at mimicking the style of legitimate legal documents: there is no statistically significant difference in the use of negation (with or without *n't) or of passive constructions between the two corpora, for example. Leaving to the side for the moment the question of how these features are actually used in LCF and PCF texts, the more that Sovereign Citizens get "right" in this quantitative sense (i.e. the more they successfully reproduce features that characterize legitimate legal writings at the appropriate rate), the more superficially successful their imitative magical attempts can be judged to be (i.e. the more likely their texts are to be confused with ones possessing actual legal authority). Of course, as said above, the magical Sovereign Citizen approach to the legal system is not interested in mere imitation; it is ultimately as, if not more, concerned with the heightening of markedly legal features in an attempt to establish magical, and therefore authoritative, supremacy. Before examining instances of such Sovereign Citizen magical heightening, however, it is worth first acknowledging another potential explanation for differences between the LCF and PCF corpora: namely, that Sovereign Citizens simply are not very good at legal writing.

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[7] For the full data behind this table, see Griffin (2022), pp. 97, 105, 117-118, 123-124.

Individuals who are familiar with the purpose and structure of a genre are considered "expert users" who have acquired "genre competence" (Cheng, 2010, pp. 89–90; Stein, 2015, p. 61). These expert users are able to create new documents that belong to their target genre because they know how to successfully adapt its conventions to their immediate circumstances. A lawyer who is able to write an appropriate response to an opposing party's motion, for example, would be considered an expert user of that genre in a way that a lay *pro se* litigant (i.e. a person without legal training representing themselves in court)[8] would likely not be. Given their clear disdain and disregard for the legitimate legal system and its representatives, Sovereign Citizens are almost definitionally not expert users of the LCF genre, and there are a number of areas in which a comparison of the LCF and PCF corpora makes this clear. At times, while it seems possible to determine what aspect of an LCF text the author of a given Sovereign Citizen text was attempting to imitate, they simply miss the mark. For example, the phrase "the below signed" appears multiple times in the PCF corpus, without ever appearing in the LCF corpus, which exclusively uses "the undersigned" in similar signatory contexts. More often, though, the Sovereign Citizen lack of competence in the LCF genre is clearest in features that they appear to have left entirely unconsidered.

Table 3 presents the predominant design choices observed at the whole-text level in the LCF and PFC corpora (i.e. those choices that were most common throughout each text when read as a whole):

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[8] In most countries outside the US, people in this category are identified by courts and legal academic commentators as "self-represented litigants" or "SRLs."

Table 3 – Predominant design choices in the LCF and PCF corpora at the whole-text level

	LCF (138 Texts)		PCF (250 Texts)			
Spacing	Total	Percent	Total	Percent	Significant?	P-Value
Single	28	20.3	145	58	Yes	49.663
1.5	10	7.2	33	13.2	No	2.6227
Double	100	72.5	72	28.8	Yes	66.935
Alignment	Total	Percent	Total	Percent	Significant?	P-Value
Justified	81	58.7	96	38.4	Yes	13.957
Left	57	41.3	154	61.6	Yes	13.957
Font Family	Total	Percent	Total	Percent	Significant?	P-Value
Serif	133	96.4	194	77.6	Yes	22.264
Sans-Serif	2	1.4	39	15.6	Yes	17.373
Monospace	2	1.4	7	2.8	-	-
Handwritten	1	0.7	10	4	-	-

In the above table, the most common design choice in terms of font family, interlinear spacing, and text alignment for each corpus has been underlined. Both PCF and LCF texts are generally written in a serif font, though comparatively speaking, PCF texts do use sans serif fonts at a statistically significantly higher rate than LCF texts. LCF texts are most likely to be double spaced with justified text while PCF texts are most likely to be single spaced with left-aligned text. In every instance in which a given document design choice was made at a statistically significantly higher frequency in the PCF corpus than in the LCF corpus (i.e. the use of single spacing, left-aligned text, and a sans serif font), that choice aligns with the current default settings of both Microsoft Word and Google Docs. This relative tendency towards software default settings is also visible in the placement of page numbers in the bottom right corner of the page in PCF texts, rather than almost exclusively in the bottom center of the page as observed in LCF texts (Griffin, 2022, pp. 183–184). In these cases, Sovereign Citizens appear to get it wrong (imitatively speaking) through either a lack of awareness or a lack of interest in some of the generic conventions of LCF texts. Ultimately, it is not possible to know, of course, what the author of a given Sovereign Citizen text was thinking when they designed it, but these instances stand in stark contrast to the many of the other differences observed between the LCF and PCF corpora that seem both more purposeful and magically significant.

The consensus description of legal English holds that the register makes far less frequent use of pronouns than does standard English, and comparing the frequency of subject and object pronouns between COCA-W and the LCF corpus supports that conclusion: the LCF corpus uses

significantly fewer instances of all examined pronouns than COCA-W both individually and in the aggregate (Griffin, 2022, pp. 103–106). A comparison of the use of pronouns between LCF and PCF texts, however, paints a more complicated picture. Table 4 displays the frequency of subject and object pronouns in the two corpora:

Table 4 – Frequency of subject and object pronouns in the LCF and PCF corpora

Person & Function[9]		Pronoun	LCF Freq.	LCF Norm.	PCF Freq.	PCF Norm.	Significant?	P-Value
Singular	1s	I	183	60	1,003	279	Yes	438.28
	1o	me	25	8	381	106	Yes	254.74
	2	you	73	24	408	114	Yes	179.82
	3ms	he	465	154	427	119	Yes	14.489
	3mo	him	99	33	111	31	No	0.11699
	3fs	she	223	74	250	70	No	0.32784
	3fo	her	370	122	416	116	No	0.52039
	3n	it	1,028	339	1,534	427	Yes	32.322
Plural	1s	we	63	21	227	63	Yes	66.4
	1o	us	1	0	44	12	Yes	32.593
	2	you	[Included in "you" line above]					
	3s	they	415	137	660	184	Yes	21.735
	3o	them	128	42	221	61	Yes	11.169
		Total	3,073	1,015	5,682	1,581	Yes	403.47

As can be seen above, the PCF corpus makes significantly more frequent use of subject and object pronouns overall than does the LCF corpus. At the individual level, there is no significant difference in the frequency of "him," "she," or "her," but the PCF corpus does make significantly more frequent use of "I," "me," "you," "it," "we," "us," "they," and "them." "He" is notable as both the only gendered third-person pronoun to have a statistically significant difference in frequency between the two corpora and as the only pronoun examined that occurs significantly more frequently in the LCF corpus than the PCF corpus.

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[9] Where present, "s", "o", "m", "f", and "n" indicate a given pronoun's function and grammatical gender. "s" indicates a subject pronoun while "o" indicates an object pronoun. "m", "f", and "n" refer to pronouns which are grammatically masculine, feminine, and neuter, respectively.

This more frequent use of "he" in the LCF corpus is at some level surprising given that the Sovereign Citizen movement appears to have a largely male membership. 85% of the Sovereign Citizens examined in Smith (2016, p. 35), for example, were male, and similar demographic trends have been noted in research on other rightwing and anti-government groups (e.g., Muddle (2019, p. 78) estimates that the American "alt-right" is approximately two-thirds male). While this study did not have access to information about the individuals who originally filed the texts that comprise the LCF and PCF corpora, the data in Table 4 offers its own compelling explanation: namely, that the (presumably) generally male authors of PCF texts avoid the use of third person masculine pronouns because they write about themselves in the first person.[10]

The use of first-person pronouns in the LCF corpus is highly restricted in terms of both frequency and context. All occurrences of "I," "me," "we," and "us" combined account for less than 9% of total pronoun use in the LCF corpus, and every such use is either part of a sworn statement (e.g., "A true and accurate copy of the payment history and any document I reviewed when making this affidavit is attached"), or an instance of reported speech (e.g., "Q: You don't have anything in writing from your mom authorizing you to do that? A: I don't."). In the PCF corpus, by way of contrast, first-person pronouns are not only statistically significantly more common, occurring at a normalized rate more than five times than that which they do in the LCF corpus, but they also account for 29% of overall pronoun use, or more than three times their proportional share in the LCF corpus. Unlike in the LCF corpus, the use of first-person pronouns in the PCF corpus largely defies easy categorization (as a point of comparison, just over 7% of the instances of "I" in the PCF corpus (74/1003) are identifiable as reported speech). Most notably, however, first person pronouns are often used to recount some kind of personal narrative ("Many years ago I left an order for Judge Dennis (I have forgotten his last name) to sign.") or, in the use of most interest to the present study, to lay claim to some sort of special power or status on the part of the text's author ("I, Maurice Sanjay Koolen state for the record that I am a Natural Living Flesh and Blood Being.").

A review of all uses of first-person pronouns across the PCF corpus (see Griffin, 2022, pp. 107–113) reveals that such pronouns are generally followed by an appositive (e.g., "I, Maurice Sanjay Koolen" from the above example), a conjugated form of "to be," or an explicit performative verb.[11] Table 5 shows a selection of such instances from the PCF corpus:

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[10] It is worth acknowledging here that, while the frequent use of first-person pronouns is indisputably a distinguishing feature of PCF texts relative to LCF texts, it is not necessarily a feature that is unique to PCF texts among all legal (or even pseudolegal) genres. The writings of *pro se* litigants, for example, may well use first-person pronouns at a comparable rate to PCF texts, but the difference in register between courtroom documents written by lawyers and those written by non-Sovereign Citizen *pro se* litigants has yet to be examined by either lawyers or linguists. Such questions are beyond the scope of this article and are left for future study.

[11] Explicit performative verbs are those verbs for which "the act of speaking and the act of doing are the same" (Solan, 1993, p. 154). Such verbs are particularly common in legal contexts, with law itself having been described as "a system of [performative] speech acts" (DeLong, 2015, p. 82). A judge pronouncing a defendant guilty or not guilty of a crime, for example, legally

Table 5 – Selected occurrences of "I" followed by an appositive (n=199), a conjugation of "to be" (n=193), or an explicit performative verb (n=181) in the PCF corpus

Line	Text
1	I, Ronan Blackwood the living MAN, in the capacity of Ronan Blackwood am recorded as the grantee on the warranty deed.
2	I :lorena-cornelia: furlan, Sui Juris, by special visitation [special appearance],
3	I, :brigid-olivia, a true woman of God, acknowledge only blessings given by God;
4	amina tinker, as defendant, makes affirmation that I am a man of the feminine gender,
5	Pursuant to 15 US Statute at Large, I declare that I am not a 14th Amendment citizen of the U.S. corporation
6	I am NOT as I AM NOT a Corporation
7	explicitly under reserve and without prejudice, I hereby and herein claim liberties provided or required via treaties as well as common law jurisdiction.
8	I REBUT that the Court has jurisdiction as the Judge and bar attorneys are foreign agents.
9	in accordance with the powers granted in this document, I hereby represent, warrant and agree that:

As the extracts in Table 5 make clear, the authors of PCF texts place a great deal of importance upon emphasizing their own power and personhood. The above lines show that while a Sovereign Citizen litigant may be a "living MAN" (line 1) or "a true woman of God" (line 3), they are "NOT a Corporation" (line 6). Their status enables them to "hereby and herein claim liberties" of an unclear nature (line 7) and to "REBUT that the Court has jurisdiction" over them (line 8). That these statements are all legally meaningless is both unsurprising and, at least magically speaking, the point. Sovereign Citizens lay claim to these statuses and powers as part of their efforts to establish magical and authoritative supremacy over the legal system; since their claimed powers exceed those of the legal system, there is no need for them to make sense within its confines, and doing so may even be seen as a tacit acquiescence to its authority. As stated above, first-person pronoun use in the LCF corpus is both infrequent and highly contextually restricted. Outside of reported speech, then, it seems that all "I" can do in the LCF corpus is certify the truth of something; in the PCF corpus, however, "I" can do whatever "I" want.

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establishes that defendant's guilt (or lack thereof) regardless of whether the defendant actually committed that crime (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 838; Dunn, 2003; Gotti, 2012, p. 57). For more on speech act theory generally, see Austin (1962), Searle (1969), and (1976).

There are multiple instances of emphatic capitalization in Table 5, such as "I am NOT as I AM NOT a Corporation" in line 6. Such emphasis, which generally registers as "shouting" to a reader (McCulloch, 2019), can found throughout the PCF corpus and appears to be particularly common near negators such as "not" and "no" (Griffin, 2022, pp. 100–103). There is no comparable use of emphatic capitalization in the LCF corpus; "NO" is capitalized 109 times in the PCF corpus, for example, but only twice in the LCF corpus and both of those instances are as part of section headings that are themselves written in all capital letters. While emphatic capitalization in the PCF corpus can serve to enhance the seemingly talismanic power of markedly legal vocabulary ("It's a VIOLATION of the 11th Amendment for a FOREIGN CITIZEN to INVOKE the JUDICIAL POWER of the State"), it also often serves to highlight another notable difference between the two corpora: namely, the use of second-person pronouns. Just as "I" appears significantly more frequently in the PCF corpus than it does in the LCF corpus, so too does "you" (see Table 4 above). And just as the authors of the texts in the PCF corpus are concerned with defining who "I" am and what "I" can do, so too are they interested in defining who "you" are and the things that "you" owe them. Table 6 displays some of these uses of "you" in the PCF corpus, both with and without emphatic capitalization:

Table 6 – Selected Occurrences of "you" in the PCF corpus (n=408)

Line	Text
10	Slavery and involuntary servitude have been outlawed worldwide since 1926. You will find no slave here. Don't Tread On Me!
11	I exist in the land of the living you only have jurisdiction over the dead.
12	As such, Claimant is asking that YOU stipulate whether YOU are the holder in due course for Claimants' promissory note
13	HOWEVER, IF YOU FAIL TO ACKNOWLEDGE TRUSTOR'S REORGANIZATION OF THE TRUSTS AND DEMANDS AND YOU PROCEED WITH THE FORECLOSURE SALE, YOU WILL BE PROCEEDING WITHOUT LAWFUL AUTHORITY

The importance of personal status to the authors of PCF texts remains on display, as seen in line 10's "You will find no slave here." That emphasis is taken a step further now, however, by the subsequent command, in which there remains an implicit "you" (i.e. "[You must not] Tread On Me!"). The question of who "you" are throughout the PCF corpus has a very inclusive answer: "you" is used in both the singular and plural to refer to any and all non-Sovereign Citizen participants in the legal process. It can refer to judges and their purported lack of power over a Sovereign Citizen litigant, for example line 11's "you only have jurisdiction over the dead," or the opposing party and either their duties to the Sovereign Citizen litigant ("Claimant is asking that YOU stipulate whether YOU are the holder ..." in line 12) or the risks that they face in opposing a Sovereign Citizen in the first place ("IF YOU FAIL TO ACKNOWLEDGE TRUSTOR'S REORGANIZATION ... YOU WILL BE PROCEEDING WITHOUT LAWFUL AUTHORITY" in line 13).

Despite their authors' preoccupation with both their own power and identity and that of their opponents, PCF texts should not be mistaken for attempts to engage in a dialogue; the inadequacy of government power, is, after all, one of the fundamental tenets of Sovereign Citizen pseudolegal thought (Netolitzky, 2018, Netolitzky & Warman, 2020, pp. 733–734, 738) and there is no point in engaging as equals with an opposing party who is perceived to be so far below oneself (much less to subordinate oneself before a judge who is believed to be illegitimate). This disjunction serves to point out a fundamental contradiction laid bare in the PCF corpus: namely, the mismatch between Sovereign Citizens' stated beliefs about their insuperable magical legal authority and their simultaneous participation in the very legal system whose power they deny. It is, of course, a mistake to look for such logic or self-awareness in the actions of a group of conspiracy theorists but it is nonetheless interesting to consider how individual Sovereign Citizens process any resultant cognitive dissonance. Such questions are, however, ultimately beyond the scope of this study.

V.   Conclusion

Sovereign Citizens go to a great deal of trouble in their pseudolegal texts to emphasize their own power, identity, and magical supremacy over the legal system. As shown in this study, in terms of the written language that they use, they do this through a much more frequent use of pronouns, particularly first- and second-person pronouns, than can be found in comparable legal documents, and they do this in spite of the fact that such pronoun use clearly distinguishes their texts from legitimate legal texts. The importance that Sovereign Citizens place on these features (as evidenced by their frequent emphatic capitalization, among other factors) ultimately leads to three distinct conclusions:

1. PCFs are highly and perhaps primarily concerned with establishing the identity and power of their authors as individuals;
2. PCFs frame judges and other representatives of the legitimate legal system as a single collective out-group; and
3. PCFs present their authors as the wielders of true legal authority while simultaneously, if implicitly, acknowledging the real-world power that the legitimate legal system wields over them.

Sovereign Citizen pseudolegal texts are not legitimate legal texts and should not be read as such. They are, however, closely related at the genre level and there remains much to be gained from the further study of Sovereign Citizen pseudolegal discourse. This article and Griffin (2022) hopefully can provide a useful starting point for future research in this area.

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