HANDBOOK OF COMMUNICATION IN THE LEGAL SPHERE

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OVERVIEW

Edited by Jacqueline Visconti, *The Handbook of Communication in the Legal Sphere* is a seminal interdisciplinary volume that explores how language functions within legal systems across various socio-political, linguistic, and cultural contexts. Drawing from applied linguistics, discourse analysis, legal theory, translation studies, and computational linguistics, the book examines the role of legal communication in shaping institutions, regulating behavior, and reflecting power dynamics. Its contributors represent diverse legal traditions and linguistic expertise, providing theoretical insight and empirical grounding.

At the heart of the book is the compelling argument that legal language is not a neutral or technical tool but a deeply embedded communicative practice that constructs and constrains meaning. Law is mediated by language, and the manner in which it is written, interpreted, translated, and processed has significant consequences for justice, inclusion, and equity.

This review focuses on five chapters that best exemplify the book's core concerns: the discursive foundations of law, legal interpretation, semantic processing, multilingual harmonization, and linguistic diversity in Arabic legal systems. Each chapter contributes to the broader goal of understanding law through a linguistic lens, while also introducing specialized themes, such as judicial discretion, computational processing, and gendered implications of legal discourse.

INTRODUCTION

In her introduction, Jacqueline Visconti establishes the analytical framework for the volume. She asserts that law is "a form of institutionalized communication that both reflects and shapes the society in which it operates" (Visconti, 2018, p. 1). Rejecting the idea that legal texts can be wholly objective or self-executing, she emphasizes their reliance on linguistic form, interpretation, and socio-historical context.

A key theme in this chapter is the performative nature of legal language. Visconti argues that legal texts do not merely describe the law; rather, they create legal reality through speech acts that confer obligations, rights, and duties (p. 2). She draws on discourse theory and legal semiotics to explain how features such as formality, passive constructions, and modal verbs contribute to the construction of authority within legal communication.

Importantly, Visconti situates legal language within structures of power and inequality. She notes that the interpretive ambiguity of legal discourse often works to the detriment of marginalized groups, including women, linguistic minorities, and those with limited access to legal literacy. Her framing introduces a central motif of the book: the need to interrogate how language in the legal sphere reinforces or challenges social hierarchies.

THE INTERPRETATION OF LAWS

In his chapter, Lawrence Solan addresses a fundamental issue in legal linguistics: How should laws be interpreted when their language is ambiguous, vague, or contested? He explores the semantic and pragmatic challenges of statutory interpretation, emphasizing that "legal texts are replete with words that have multiple meanings, and meanings that change depending on context" (Solan, 2018, p. 24).

The chapter's central theme is the interplay between literalism and purposivism. Solan highlights how the courts often oscillate between reading laws as strictly text-based and interpreting them in light of legislative intent or broader social goals. He discusses how syntactic structures, such as nested clauses or vague modifiers, increase interpretive complexity and open the door to judicial discretion.

Solan offers empirical examples from case law where divergent interpretations have led to materially different outcomes, particularly in cases involving rights, discrimination, or regulation. He writes: "What judges mean by the words of the law may not be what the drafters intended, and yet this interpretation becomes authoritative" (p. 30). This observation reinforces the broader idea that interpretation is inseparable from institutional power.

SEMANTIC PROCESSING OF LEGAL TEXTS

In their chapter, Tommaso Agnoloni and Giulia Venturi shift the focus to the technological domain of legal linguistics, examining natural language processing (NLP) and the semantic analysis of legal texts. They examine how legal corpora are structured and how computational tools are used to extract meaning, identify patterns, and support legal decision-making.

A key theme in this chapter is the tension between formal structure and semantic richness. While legal texts are highly codified, which aids automation, they are also embedded in specific legal traditions and interpretive cultures that challenge machine readability. As the authors note, "While the structure

of legal documents facilitates computational analysis, the complexity of legal reasoning and variability of language pose serious obstacles" (Agnoloni & Venturi, 2018, p. 86).

Another critical insight concerns bias in automated systems. The authors caution that "if socio-linguistic features—such as gendered language or cultural nuances—are not integrated into semantic models, the outputs may reproduce or exacerbate institutional bias" (p. 91). Thus, the chapter underlines the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration between linguists, legal scholars, and computer scientists to ensure ethical and equitable legal automation.

MULTILINGUAL INTERPRETATION OF EUROPEAN UNION LAW

In her chapter, Silvia Ferreri addresses the complexities of maintaining semantic equivalence in a multilingual legal system. The European Union, which operates with 24 official languages, must ensure that each version of a law is not just a translation, but legally binding and substantively consistent. As Ferreri observes, "the risk is not only inconsistency, but legal uncertainty that may compromise rights protection" (Ferreri, 2018, p. 252).

The chapter's core theme is the inherent instability of multilingual lawmaking. Ferreri identifies how small shifts in grammar, modal verbs, or legal idioms—such as the use of "may" versus "shall"—can result in interpretive divergences between language versions. She notes that "language-specific interpretations can lead to a fragmentation of rights and obligations within the same legal order" (p. 258).

This issue is especially pressing in gender-sensitive laws, where the absence of inclusive terminology in one language version may dilute the intended protection. Ferreri calls for improved comparative linguistic frameworks and greater involvement of legal linguists in drafting and review processes to preserve both equality and legal certainty.

UNITY AND VARIETIES OF ARABIC AS A LEGAL LANGUAGE

Roberta Aluffi's contribution focuses on the diglossic nature of Arabic legal systems, where Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is used for formal legal drafting, while dialects (ʿāmmiyya) dominate in oral proceedings and everyday legal communication. She writes that "this diglossic split creates communicative barriers for legal actors and litigants, especially women and those from rural areas" (Aluffi, 2018, p. 282).

The central theme of this chapter is legal pluralism in linguistically diverse societies. Aluffi demonstrates that classical Arabic legal terminology, often derived from Islamic jurisprudence, continues to shape contemporary personal status law, especially in family, inheritance, and custody cases. These laws are not only linguistically opaque but are also often grounded in patriarchal legal traditions.

She argues for a critical re-evaluation of legal language in Arabic legal systems, calling for reforms that promote both linguistic inclusivity and gender equity. "Legal language reform must be about more than clarity," she writes. "It must be about access, agency, and dignity for all legal subjects" (p. 293).

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Together, these chapters exemplify the central contribution of the *Handbook of Communication in the Legal Sphere:* language is constitutive of law, not ancillary to it. Each chapter, in its own way, demonstrates that legal meaning is not fixed in texts but continually negotiated through interpretation, translation, and application.

Themes of ambiguity, discretion, multilingualism, technological mediation, and gendered discourse recur throughout, creating a coherent and compelling picture of law as a living, language-bound system. Whether analyzing statutory interpretation in Solan's work, translation dilemmas in Ferreri's case studies, or diglossia in Aluffi's analysis of Arabic legal systems, the book provides a multifaceted framework for understanding law through a linguistic lens.

As Visconti reminds us in the introduction, "Understanding legal communication today means confronting not only textual complexity, but also cultural difference, institutional power, and social inequality" (Visconti, 2018, p. 10). This handbook is an essential resource for scholars of legal linguistics, sociolegal studies, comparative law, and gender and language.

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