



Students' Semantic and Pragmatic Challenges in Comprehending Basic Legal English Vocabulary of Law Students in University of Tjut Nyak Dhien Medan

Min Adlina^{*1} & Agusman Halawa²

^{1,2}Universitas Tjut Nyak Dhien, Medan, Indonesia.

*Corresponding Author: minadlinaa@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Legal English contains expressions whose meanings often diverge from everyday usage, which makes them challenging for learners who approach the language without sufficient background in legal contexts. This qualitative study explores how Indonesian readers interpret basic legal vocabulary and identifies patterns of misunderstanding from both semantic and pragmatic perspectives. The data reveal three recurring concerns: difficulties with polysemous terms, misinterpretation of context-bound legal expressions, and uncertainty when encountering formulaic or Latin-derived phrases. These findings echo the latest discussions in legal linguistics and applied semantics (Biel, 2020; Trosborg, 2023; Williams, 2022). A notable factor contributing to these issues is the learners' limited exposure to authentic legal texts. The article recommends strengthening context-sensitive vocabulary instruction and providing corpus-based learning resources to build more accurate semantic and pragmatic awareness.

Keywords: Legal English, Vocabulary Interpretation, Indonesian Learners

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1. Introduction

Legal English is a distinct, highly specialized register that departs significantly from general English in both linguistic structure and communicative function. It is characterized by dense phraseology, archaic and Latin-derived expressions, extensive nominalization, and a high degree of lexical specialization. These features arise from the historical development of Anglo-American legal systems, in which precision, stability, and institutional convention play central roles. As Biel (2020) notes, legal discourse is “intrinsically conservative,” preserving forms and expressions that may appear opaque or outdated to contemporary language users. Consequently, the comprehension of legal texts presents substantial challenges not only for lay readers but also for advanced users of English.

In foreign-language contexts such as Indonesia, where English is learned primarily through general EFL instruction, these challenges are intensified. Learners are typically exposed to English through communicative or academic-general genres, with minimal contact with authentic legal materials. This limited exposure results in weak conceptual grounding in legal terminology and insufficient awareness of the pragmatic norms that govern legal communication. Recent research highlights that legal meaning is often layered, context-

dependent, and nonliteral, making it especially difficult for learners whose proficiency develops outside legal environments (Trosborg, 2023; Williams, 2022).

One central source of difficulty lies in the semantic behavior of legal terms. Many lexical items such as *action*, *charge*, *consideration*, *execution*, *offer*, or *party*—have everyday meanings that diverge considerably from their legal senses. This phenomenon of polysemy and semantic drift is well documented in contemporary lexicological scholarship (Murphy, 2021; Hanks, 2022). Learners who rely on general-language intuition often misinterpret such terms, assuming that their legal usage aligns with their common-usage equivalents. Alhawary (2023), in a recent study on English for Legal Purposes, observes that EFL learners frequently “default to everyday semantic prototypes,” leading them to overlook specialized institutional meanings embedded in legal texts.

The problem extends beyond semantics to pragmatics. Legal English often encodes relationships of obligation, permission, entitlement, and restriction not through explicit markers but through conventionalized forms. For example, the modal *shall* typically express legal obligation rather than futurity, while *may* signal discretion rather than mere possibility. Formulaic expressions such as *without prejudice*, *hereby*, *to the extent that*, or *subject to* function as pragmatic operators that constrain interpretation according to legal norms. Cutting (2020) emphasizes that these expressions derive their force not from syntactic form alone but from their embeddedness within legal institutions and genres. Misinterpreting them can lead to significant misunderstanding of legal intent.

Recent studies further reveal that learners struggle to distinguish when a term functions as a technical legal item versus when it retains its general meaning. Research on legal vocabulary acquisition among Indonesian EFL learners shows recurring issues with morphological complexity, lexical ambiguity, and the interpretative demands of nominalized structures, all of which increase cognitive load in reading legal texts (Rahman & Saeed, 2023). Because legal meaning is often constructed through precise relational logic and intertextual references, insufficient familiarity with legal conventions compounds these comprehension difficulties. Given these challenges, this article examines the semantic and pragmatic issues that arise when Indonesian readers engage with basic legal vocabulary. By focusing on how learners interpret polysemous terms, context-bound expressions, and formulaic legal phrases, the study aims to shed light on the patterns of misunderstanding that commonly occur. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions in legal linguistics and applied semantics and underscore the need for instructional approaches that integrate context-sensitive vocabulary teaching and corpus-based materials to build more accurate semantic and pragmatic awareness.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Semantic Theory and Polysemy

Legal vocabulary often exhibits polysemy, in which a single word may carry multiple distinct meanings depending on context. Learners often default to the most common or general meaning, leading to misinterpretation (Murphy, 2021). Hanks (2022) further notes that specialized fields, such as law, tend to develop narrower, technical senses for otherwise familiar words.

2.2. Pragmatics and Context Dependence

The interpretation of legal expressions often depends on their pragmatic function rather than literal wording. For instance, *hereby* and *shall* often operate as performative markers in legal discourse (Trosborg, 2023; Fraser, 2020). Without recognizing these functions, readers may offer inaccurate interpretations.

2.3. Formulaic Sequences

Legal language is rich in fixed expressions and binomial pairs such as *null and void* or *cease and desist*. These cannot be interpreted by simply combining the meaning of individual words. Instead, they operate as semantic units that convey specific legal effects (Paquot & Granger, 2021).

2.4. Cognitive Load

Long noun phrases, technical terminology, and Latin phrases often increase the processing burden on readers. Kormos (2020) emphasizes that additional cognitive load affects comprehension and reduces interpretive accuracy.

2.5. Corpus-Based Perspectives

Recent research supports the use of corpus tools to understand how legal vocabulary functions in authentic contexts. These tools reveal patterns that may not be evident in dictionary-based explanations (Goźdż-Roszkowski & Ponrandolfo, 2019; Williams, 2022).

3. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore how Indonesian learners interpret common legal vocabulary (Adlina & Gapur, 2024; Gapur et al., 2024; Moleong, 2014). The qualitative approach was selected because the study focuses on uncovering patterns of meaning construction and the reasoning that guides learners' interpretations, rather than measuring accuracy numerically.

3.1. Document Analysis

The first stage of data collection involved analyzing a set of legal texts published between 2020 and 2024. These materials included short statutory extracts, contract clauses, simplified case summaries, and curated legal news segments. The texts were screened to identify vocabulary items that frequently generate semantic or pragmatic confusion among non-specialist readers. This analytical step served two purposes:

- (1) to create an inventory of problematic terms, and
- (2) to establish authentic linguistic contexts that reflect current usage in contemporary legal discourse.

3.2 Elicitation Task

The second stage consisted of an elicitation activity involving 15 students enrolled in English or law-related programs. Participants were presented with a series of short legal sentences extracted from the earlier corpus, each containing one or more target terms (e.g., *execution*, *action*, *without prejudice*, *shall*). They were asked to explain the meaning of each sentence in their own words.

The responses were then examined using thematic analysis, following interpretative procedures described in recent pragmatic interpretation studies (Fraser, 2020). Coding focused on identifying recurring tendencies, such as reliance on everyday meanings, literal reading of functional expressions, or difficulty processing formulaic sequences. The combination of text analysis and elicitation enabled the capture of both the linguistic features of the input and learners' interpretative behavior.

4. Findings

4.1 Semantic Deviations

A consistent pattern across participants was the tendency to default to everyday meanings when encountering legal terms. For instance, *execution* was commonly taken to mean "carrying out a death sentence," and *action* was interpreted as "a physical movement." These readings overlook the established legal senses—"the enforcement of a court judgment" and "a formal legal proceeding." Similar deviations have been highlighted in the literature, particularly in the work of Murphy (2021) and Hanks (2022), who note that specialized registers often repurpose familiar words in ways that contradict intuitive everyday usage.

4.2 Pragmatic Misinterpretation

Learners also struggled with expressions that are highly functional in legal discourse. The modal verb *shall* was interpreted primarily as a marker of futurity rather than obligation, and *without prejudice* was read literally, without recognizing its conventional legal role in protecting a party's rights. These interpretations indicate limited awareness of how pragmatic force operates in legal settings, supporting observations made by Trosborg (2023) and Cutting (2020).

4.3 Formulaic Expressions

Multiword legal expressions presented additional difficulty. Phrases such as *null and void* were usually translated word-for-word, resulting in incomplete or distorted interpretations. This literal processing pattern is consistent with Paquot and Granger's (2021) findings, which show that formulaic sequences tend to impose heavier cognitive demands on second-language readers due to their non-compositional meaning.

4.4 Latin and Archaic Terms

Latin-derived expressions (*prima facie*, *inter alia*) and archaic terms (*heretofore*, *hereinafter*) were unfamiliar to most participants. Their lack of recognizability led to guessing strategies or avoidance. Goźdź-Roszkowski and Ponrandolfo (2019) note that such expressions remain deeply embedded in legal discourse, and for multilingual readers they often constitute one of the steepest barriers to text comprehension.

5. Discussion

5.1 Semantic Complexity

The findings suggest that learners' semantic challenges stem from the dual meanings carried by many legal terms. Legal vocabulary often forms part of a specialized semantic network that departs significantly from

general-language usage. The observed confusion surrounding terms like *action* and *execution* closely mirrors the semantic divergence described by Murphy (2021) and Hanks (2022). These results reaffirm that polysemy is a central obstacle in Legal English comprehension for EFL learners.

5.2 Pragmatic Awareness

Misinterpretation of legally functional expressions highlights another layer of complexity. Legal meaning is not always encoded lexically; instead, it frequently arises from the pragmatic conventions of the legal system. Learners' difficulty in recognizing obligation in *shall* or the protective role of *without prejudice* suggests that pragmatic knowledge is essential for accurate interpretation. This finding is consistent with Fraser's (2020) argument that pragmatic interpretation depends heavily on the communicative context and genre norms.

5.3 Formulaicity and Cognitive Load

Formulaic expressions place significant cognitive demands on readers unfamiliar with the structure of legal texts. Because many multiword legal units do not yield meaning through simple compositional analysis, literal translation leads to distorted interpretations. Paquot and Granger (2021) and Kormos (2020) both emphasize that formulaicity contributes to processing difficulty, particularly in contexts where learners have limited exposure to institutionalized textual patterns.

5.4 Corpus-Based Insights

The recurring misinterpretation patterns observed in this study align with corpus-based research showing that legal meaning is often clarified through collocation, repeated phraseology, and conventional contexts of use (Goźdż-Roszkowski & Pontrandolfo, 2019; Williams, 2022). The findings reinforce the value of corpus-driven instruction, which exposes learners to authentic patterns of use that cannot be captured through dictionary definitions alone.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Indonesian learners encounter substantial semantic and pragmatic challenges when interpreting basic Legal English vocabulary. Misunderstanding commonly arises due to four interconnected factors:

- (1) the polysemous nature of many legal terms,
- (2) context-dependent pragmatic functions,
- (3) the opacity of formulaic expressions, and
- (4) unfamiliarity with Latin and archaic terminology.

Together, these factors create a complex interpretive environment that cannot be navigated effectively through general-language competence alone. The results underscore the importance of increasing learners' exposure to authentic legal texts and integrating explicit instruction on the pragmatic force of legal expressions. Approaches that incorporate corpus-based examples, genre-sensitive analysis, and contrastive semantic explanations may help students build more accurate and confident comprehension of Legal English.

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