"Annul, cancel or dismiss?" – or How to Deal with Synonymy in Legal Language

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Students learning legal language inevitably face a bewildering range of synonymous or related terms appearing in legal texts. For example, the semantic field 'cancel' contains lexical items such as: 'annul', 'revoke', 'dismiss', 'overrule', 'quash', 'strike out', 'recall', or 'reverse', to name just a few (cf. Alcaraz & Hughes, 2002). Apart from lexical synonymy, equally troublesome is the area of synonymical chains, i.e. "a series of synonyms whether linking two, three or more lexical units having the same or similar meaning serving the special (and intended) purpose of making the sense of the utterance as clear as practicable and its interpretation as unequivocal as possible" (Chroma, 2011). This area of legal lexicon appears to be the most problematic for any type of students, whether they are law professionals, law students or translators. As of today, there are hardly any teaching resources (e.g. textbooks, monolingual or bilingual thesauri, dictionaries of synonyms or antonyms, etc.) that could effectively clarify the nuances of meaning and usage involved in such terms.

This paper is a report on a new project which aims to create linguistic tools that would deal systematically with the area of synonymy in legal language. To that end, a new multi-genre ESP corpus is being created. At present, the data comprises seven written genres used in the US legal system totaling over 5,500,000 running words. These range from primary genres such as federal legislation and the Supreme Court opinions, through operative documents (briefs, contracts, powers of attorney) to academic genres (journal articles and textbooks). The Oxford WordSmith Tools 5.0 software has been employed to carry out detailed quantitative and qualitative analyses of selected terms.

The present study argues that differences between such terms can be to a large extent accounted for by referring to certain contextual parameters such as legal domain (e.g. labour law, intellectual property law), genre (e.g. statute, judgment or contract) and phraseological patterns (Gries, 2008: 6-7). It turns out that co-occurrence patterns of specialized vocabulary include semantic preference and semantic prosody (Sinclair, 1987) as well as their local textual functions (Mahlberg, 2009).

After providing the rationale behind the corpus design and describing its architecture, this paper will move on to a case study involving four synonymous or related terms, such as *breach, infringement, violation* and *contravention* It will be demonstrated how creating a phraseological profile of each related term can facilitate the task of determining the scope of similarity or resemblance, permissible or acceptable differences and the distributional potential of alleged synonyms. The results as well as the methodology used in the study will be discussed in light of their applicability for creating an effective tool for teaching legal vocabulary.

References

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