

English for Legal Studies

By Giulia Adriana Pennisi

Rome, Carocci editore, 2025, pp. 180

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Keywords

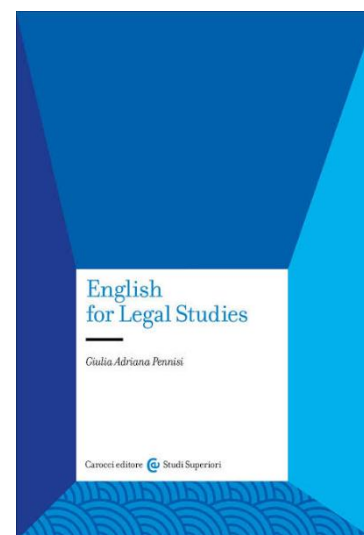
English for Academic Purposes (EAP)

English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

Legal English

Legal discourse

Genre analysis



The words of law often look like words of the language you speak, but when they are legal terms, they are not.

(David Bellos, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything*)

Giulia Adriana Pennisi's *English for Legal Studies* represents a concise yet valuable contribution to the field of Legal English and English for Academic Purposes (EAP), combining legal background knowledge, linguistic analysis, and pedagogical reflection. Published within the ELAP (English Linguistics for Academicians and Professionals) series, edited by Laura Pinnavaia and Annalisa Zanola, the book examines the growing importance of an integrated approach to legal education that takes into account both specialist discourse and professional legal communication, to respond to the evolving academic and linguistic needs of law students and legal professionals working in international contexts.

As clearly stated in the introduction, the book originates from the awareness that legal English is often perceived as a challenging and inaccessible language for both native and non-native speakers, due to its archaic terminology and lexical density (i.e., high level of nominalization), syntactic rigidity, and highly formalized sentences with complex patterns of coordination and subordination (9-11). Pennisi frames Legal English not simply as a technical language, but as a form of professional and academic discourse that calls for not only vocabulary

knowledge, but also for an awareness of legal systems, genres, and communicative conventions. Through its combination of historical background, institutional overview, and textual analysis, the volume provides readers with practical tools to approach Legal English more confidently and critically.

The book is divided into three main thematic chapters, followed by conclusions, a glossary, and bibliographic resources, enabling readers to move gradually from historical and theoretical foundations of Legal English toward the analysis of legal discourse. Such organization makes the book particularly suitable both for university teaching and for independent study.

The first chapter, “The framework,” establishes the historical and conceptual background necessary to understand the development of legal English over the course of three centuries, from the 1470s to the 1770s. Pennisi begins to trace its origins, and pays particular attention to the role of Latin and French in the formation of legal terminology and style, explaining how many of the lexical and structural features that characterize contemporary legal discourse can be traced back to earlier periods in the history of English law (15-21). This historical account explains why legal English often appears markedly different from general, ordinary English and why many of its linguistic conventions have remained relatively stable over time.

The sections dedicated to the sources of Legal English include customary law, common law and statutory law, equity, delegated legislation, and the rule of law, which provide readers with an overview of the legal tradition that underpins English-speaking legal systems (22-30). For readers with little or no prior legal background, these explanations offer an important basis for understanding the institutional and conceptual frameworks within which legal texts are produced and interpreted, as the chapter contextualizes contemporary legal discourse within socio-historical and institutional developments, combining linguistic explanation with legal and cultural awareness. The inclusion of a section on “International perspectives and legal systems” (31-39) is of particular interest, as it broadens the discussion beyond purely British or American contexts and introduces readers to the diversity of legal structures and regulations. Although brief, this comparative perspective is helpful for readers approaching legal English in global environments as it reveals that “not all countries where English is used as a legal language have common law systems” (37). The discussion of English-speaking jurisdictions and differing legal systems shows the variability of legal communication across contexts, and how legal language originated and is influenced by various sources, some of which continue to exert power and influence on its conventional uses, which are thus the expression of a long-standing tradition. In doing so, the chapter helps to demonstrate the complexity of legal discourse and its relationship with historical and cultural, local and international practices.

The second chapter, “The critical thinking area: English-speaking jurisdictions,” gradually shifts the focus from the historical and conceptual foundations of legal English to the

institutional contexts in which legal discourse is constructed. Pennisi describes the legal systems of the United Kingdom (43-62) and the United States (62-82), giving an overview of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government, as well as the roles and functions of legal professionals in both jurisdictions. The discussion of the UK legal system (45-62) covers the constitutional role of the Crown and the distribution of powers within the British legal framework, whose structure of courts and tribunals is shown in two figures (53; 57) to help convey its entities and functions. The section devoted to the United States (63-80) gives a complete picture of its federal system, thanks to a chronology of the key events which have contributed to shaping the country (64-66), and its implications for legal institutions and governance.

The sections describing the various professional roles within the legal sector, both in the UK (2.1.5) and the US (2.2.5) help to clarify certain concepts that are often unfamiliar to non-native speakers and students who do not come from these legal traditions. Terms for professional roles, such as ‘solicitor,’ ‘barrister’ in the British legal framework, and ‘lawyer,’ ‘attorney,’ ‘prosecutor’ in the US, are contextualized, highlighting the relationship between language and professional practice. Their functions are explained in such a way as to enable readers to understand how legal terminology derives from specific constitutional and administrative structures, such as the Supreme Court. By providing a detailed comparison of the legal systems of the United Kingdom and the United States, Pennisi facilitates the identification of the similarities and differences between two of the main common law traditions (81) and clarifies the distinctions between professional roles that may not have direct equivalents in other legal systems.

The third chapter, “Analysis and examples: legal texts,” constitutes the most explicitly linguistic and pedagogically oriented part of the volume. The chapter is divided into three main sections devoted to legal genres and registers, vocabulary in context, and the grammar of legal English, providing readers with an essential guide to the linguistic patterns typically found in legal communication. With regard to text types, a distinction is made between legal genres and registers (85-88), as the former represents the generic conventions of the text, while the latter encompasses its linguistic features. In Pennisi’s analysis of legal language, genre plays specific roles, such as “prohibit something, impose duties or obligations, impose an order, make promises, advocate a course of action or report the reasoning of findings of a court” (86), depending on the purposes and context of a text type.

While genres reflect the communicative and professional purposes that legal texts are intended to fulfil, register refers to the variety of language associated with a particular situation of use and communicative purpose (Biber and Conrad 2019), including the selection of vocabulary, expressions and level of formality appropriate to a specific text. From this perspective, register encompasses not only the lexical, grammatical, and stylistic features that

characterize a text, but also the situational context in which it is produced and the functional relationship between context and linguistic choices (Biber and Conrad 2019, 6). In other words, the linguistic features of a legal register occur because they are particularly suited to the communicative purposes and professional contexts in which legal discourse operates. Register shapes how legal meaning is expressed and how legal professionals adapt language to different audiences, institutional settings, and communicative goals.

Legal competence should therefore imply knowledge of both these dimensions, which means, as it is explained in Pennisi's book: "knowing how to compose a text/document or a speech in accordance with the conventions of the genre," and "knowing how to produce the register appropriate for a particular text/document or speech" (Table 3.1, 88). To illustrate the differences between these concepts, the author explains them by analyzing legal genre markers and legal text types, highlighting their lexical and grammatical structures through contextualized examples (88-95). Particular attention is devoted to the ways in which communicative purposes influence both textual organization and linguistic choices, giving rise to different text types, such as narrative, descriptive, argumentative, and comparative texts (95).

The sample texts listed in the chapter (94-95), together with the more detailed examination of wills and employment contracts (96-106), provide readers with concrete examples of how genre conventions and register features operate in practice, so as to enable them to connect theoretical explanations with practical textual analysis. The focus on vocabulary 'in context' reflects a pedagogical approach that moves beyond isolated terminology, which still remains "a fundamental component" (107), but also brings attention to the communicative functions and purposes of legal language, as well as its written strategies and textual conventions.

In the sections devoted to borrowings and loanwords, and archaic expressions, Pennisi highlights the diverse origins of legal terminology, explaining how legal English has incorporated lexical items from different linguistic and cultural traditions (110). In particular, she notes that legal English has drawn extensively from general and religious domains, assigning existing lexical items one or more specialized legal meanings. The author further distinguishes between words and expressions borrowed to designate legal concepts that were previously unknown within the English legal system and therefore considered functionally necessary, and those adopted through contact with foreign populations living in Anglo-Saxon territories, which were gradually integrated into legal English through processes of morphological adaptation (112). Moreover, it is possible to find words from general English that acquire a different (or specialized) meaning in legal domains, as well as words from non-specialized domains (i.e., ordinary English language) that maintain their original meaning and "take on a legal meaning when associated with a lexeme or context that is clearly legal" (121).

As a result, many legal terms acquire different meanings depending on the context in which they occur, showing the importance of interpreting vocabulary within its textual and communicative setting but also developing awareness of the conventions governing legal discourse and the linguistic resources through which those conventions are realized.

The book strongly reflects the research perspective developed by Pennisi in her earlier article “EALP textbooks and the challenges of legal English education” (2023), in which she examines the evolution of English for Academic Legal Purposes (EALP) textbooks over the past three decades. Drawing on her analysis of Legal English textbooks published between 2013 and 2022, the author notes that contemporary Legal English pedagogy has progressively moved away from lexico-grammar based models, in favor of a growing tendency to integrate academic and professional competences, moving beyond the traditional focus on discrete language skills, especially writing, towards more genre-based, practice-oriented approaches, to provide “a comprehensive set of skills” (2023, 71) connected to the realities of legal education and professional communication. A similar pedagogical orientation informs *English for Legal Studies*, particularly in the emphasis placed on the use of examples to explain technical terms and communicative concepts, which, together with the concluding sections, are meant to support and increase readers’ comprehension of legal discourse, and promote the integration of linguistic and professional skills.

The book is also valuable because it positions Legal English within broader discussions on specialized discourse and disciplinary communication. Rather than reducing Legal English to the acquisition of technical vocabulary, the volume may help readers acquire a more solid understanding of genre and communicative purpose, as well as register and linguistic variation, all elements that are also essential in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP), especially within the tradition associated with discourse analysis in legal studies (Bhatia, Garzone and Tessuto 2014; Bhatia, Candlin and Engberg 2008).

Overall, *English for Legal Studies* succeeds not only in providing an introduction to legal terminology, but also in serving as a resource that helps readers to familiarize themselves with the discursive practices of the legal community, thanks to its explanations of legal concepts, contextualized examples and focus on communicative functions, which provide insights into how language operates within legal genres and professional interactions. It will be of interest not only to law students, but also to teachers in the field of ESP and EAP, and language practitioners seeking an accessible resource on the linguistic and communicative dimensions of legal English that combine theoretical concepts with their practical applicability.

Bionote

Elena Borsetto holds a PhD in Educational Linguistics from Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Her teaching and research focus on English Medium Instruction (EMI), and multilingualism in higher education. During her postdoctoral research at the University of Verona, she investigated the language needs and strategies associated with EMI in medical education, collaborating with the Department of Surgical Sciences. She has experience in teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP), including to PhD students in Law, and has published articles on language education, intercultural communication, and the CEFR Companion Volume.

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