HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

HOW DOES THE PRESS EXPLAIN THE LAW?

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Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24242394

Abstract: This paper presents a coding instrument for the comparative analysis of explanatory press articles on legal topics. The instrument covers three dimensions: seven explanatory procedures, five text functions and five reader roles. It was developed for German- and Uzbek-language material and tested on authentic texts in both languages. The paper justifies the categories, sets out the decision rules for borderline cases and discusses the instrument's limitations and transferability.

Keywords: legal linguistics, knowledge communication, explanatory procedures, text function, reader role

INTRODUCTION

Law concerns everyone. Those who do not know their rights cannot exercise them. For the majority of the population the press is the most important, and frequently the only, source of legal knowledge. What this source is actually like has hardly been studied: legal linguistics focuses on texts of legal application, media linguistics on journalistic forms without reference to law, and research on comprehensibility on administrative texts. The explanatory press article on law sits between these fields.

The paper takes this gap as its starting point. It presents a coding instrument that makes explanatory procedures comparable across languages. It justifies the categories, describes the decision rules for borderline cases and demonstrates the application on authentic material.

Theoretical framework

Legal linguistics assumes that legal meaning is not fixed in the wording of a statute but emerges in the work on the text (Busse 1992). Müller and Christensen distinguish between the text of the norm and the legal norm: the text of the norm is the wording of a provision, the legal norm is the rule that applies to a concrete case. It emerges in a process in which the text of the norm and the facts of the case determine each other reciprocally (Müller/Christensen 2013: 145–180). For the analysis of press articles this means: an article that stays with the wording does not explain, it quotes.

Comprehensibility is understood here as a relational concept, not as a property of a text: the same text can be comprehensible to different degrees for different groups of readers (Langer/Schulz von Thun/Tausch 2015). This definition explains why the instrument covers three dimensions. If only

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the procedures used in an article were recorded, it would not be possible to say what they are for; if only the function were recorded, it would not be possible to say how it is realised.

Research on popularisation has shown that mediating specialist knowledge is a linguistic achievement in its own right and is not to be understood as a deficit of knowledge (Calsamiglia 2003; Luttermann/Engberg 2023). This applies to law in a particular way: law concerns everybody, it requires action, and it is contested. From these three features it follows that a coding instrument for legal texts must capture more than the explanation of terms: it must capture whether an article guides action, whether it takes positions, and in what role it addresses readers. Legal language makes mediation even more difficult because it predominantly uses words from general language to which it gives a special meaning (on the features of specialist languages see Roelcke 2020: 15–40). Readers know the words, but not their meaning in law.

The instrument

The seven explanatory procedures

The first dimension records the linguistic form in which an explanation is realised. Each category is determined by a definition, a delimitation, signal words in both languages and an anchor example.

Procedure	Definition
Definition	The term is explicitly determined: “X is …”, in Uzbek “X – bu …”
In-text explanation	The connection is explained in the running text, without a determination of the term
Paraphrase	The technical term is replaced by an everyday expression or avoided
Example	A short case illustrates a rule: “masalan …”, “for example …”
Comparison and analogy	A structure is transferred from a familiar domain
Metaphor	A figurative expression carries the statement
Case narrative	A longer case is told and the legal situation is shown through it

Table 1: Categories of the first dimension

Work on the material revealed an eighth procedure that the seven categories did not capture: the naming of open questions. The article states that a legal question has not been settled or that an explanation is missing (“However, it is not explained who …”). The procedure informs at the level of the individual action and frames at the level of the text as a whole.

Text functions and reader roles

The second dimension records what aim an article pursues; the third records in what role readers appear. Both are assigned per article, not per coding unit.

Text function	Reader role
Informing: stating what applies	Affected persons: affected by the rule
Framing: showing the context	Advice-seekers: seeking an answer to a question

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Advising: enabling action	Legal subjects: obliged to follow rules
Appealing: demanding a behaviour	Citizens: bearers of rights
Moral evaluation: judging a behaviour	Observers: following an event

Table 2: Categories of the second and third dimensions

The function is determined by the purpose of the article, not by its extent. An article that mainly describes and gives an instruction for action in two sentences informs; the instruction is a secondary function. Only recognisable evaluation is coded; covert evaluations are described qualitatively. This restriction increases reliability and reduces completeness.

Coding unit and reliability

The coding unit is the passage that carries one explanatory action. Three rules ensure consistency: an explanation extending over several sentences is recorded as one coding; a repeated explanation is recorded once; an enumeration of identically built elements is not coded more than once. The second rule prevents the number of codings from depending on the length of an article instead of on its explanatory achievement.

Reliability is tested on a sample of twenty articles coded independently by a second person. Cohen's kappa serves as the measure; the lower bound is 0.61 (Biber/Conrad/Reppen 1998: 250 ff.). Every doubtful case is noted in the coding log together with a justification.

Decision rules for borderline cases

Borderline cases are the most vulnerable part of any coding instrument. Four rules proved necessary in the work on the material.

Definition or explanation. In Uzbek the construction "– bu" carries both the determination and the explanatory continuation. What matters is whether the term is placed in subject position: if it is, there is a definition; if it is only the starting point of further remarks, an explanation.

Example or case narrative. The difference lies in extent and function. Test question: could the article exist without the case? If it could, there is an example; if it could not, a case narrative. As a guideline: at least three sentences or ten per cent of the article.

Comparison or juxtaposition. A comparison transfers a structure from a familiar domain; a juxtaposition places two regulations side by side. Juxtaposition is recorded as an explanation with an additional specification.

Quotation of a norm or explanation. The quotation of a norm is not an explanation. If the content is subsequently reproduced in one's own words, that reproduction is coded. If the article stays with the wording, the passage is recorded as "norm named, content not explained".

Application: three examples

Example 1: Inson va qonun, no. 01 (1413), 9 January 2024, p. 5 (group D, approximately 400 words). The article explains the legal consequences of a presidential decree on athletes' rights in an enumeration with dates. Five codings are recorded: four in-text explanations, one paraphrase ("o'zini o'zi band qilish huquqi" for gainful employment) and one example (reduction of the fees to one third). Dominant function: informing; reader role: citizens. The article shows that an enumeration of measures is not to be equated with an explanation: of nine points, two were coded.

Example 2: Legal Tribune Online, 13 July 2016 (group A, approximately 640 words). The article reports on a decision of the Federal Court of Justice on rent arrears. Six codings are recorded: one case narrative, one definition, two in-text explanations, one example and one paraphrase.

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Dominant function: framing; reader role: observers. The article shows the difference between presenting a norm and presenting a decision: the norm is named and explained, the decision is narrated as a case and framed in its consequences.

Example 3: istemol.uz, 10 July 2026 (group D, approximately 480 words). The article explains consumer rights in the case of defective goods, narrates a case and ends with an instruction for action in four points. Five codings are recorded: one in-text explanation, one definition (the determination of defective goods through its legal consequences), one case narrative, one example and one in-text explanation (the instruction for action). Dominant function: advising; reader role: advice-seekers. The article reveals a difficulty in determining function: it informs about the legal situation and advises at the same time. The decision fell on "advising" because the instruction for action stands at the end and names the purpose.

Comparison. The Uzbek article yields five codings for 400 words, the German one six for 640. The difference follows from the number of explanatory actions, not from the extent. Function does not determine the procedure: the informing article works with an enumeration, the framing article with a case narrative.

DISCUSSION

The instrument differs from existing approaches in three respects. First, it captures actions, not forms: a definition is present when a term becomes the object of the statement, not when a particular word appears. This determination makes the instrument applicable across languages. Second, it combines three dimensions: most studies on comprehensibility record one feature — sentence length, word frequency or the number of technical terms — whereas the instrument records three and can therefore describe how an article produces comprehensibility and for whom. Third, it discloses the decision rules: most coding instruments name categories and examples, but not the rules by which borderline cases are to be decided.

With regard to transferability it must be noted, as a limitation, that adaptation to Uzbek was necessary in three places: in the definition (because of the construction with "– bu" and "ya'ni"), in the paraphrase (because of the explanatory parenthesis) and in address (because of the politeness forms). These adaptations concern the delimitation rules, not the categories themselves. Whether they are sufficient will have to be shown by testing on further languages.

Limitations and transferability

The instrument has three limitations. It captures linguistic actions, not their effect: whether an article is comprehensible can only be established by a study with readers. It captures only recognisable evaluation: covert evaluations remain reserved for qualitative analysis. It captures only the text: images and graphics are considered only in so far as they are announced in the text.

The instrument is transferable to further text types and languages because it captures actions and not forms. What is required in each case is the specification of signal words in the new language and the testing of the delimitation rules. Experience with the Uzbek material shows that adaptation is necessary in few places: in the definition, in the paraphrase and in address.

The instrument is not a measure of the quality of an article. It assigns procedures and counts them; it does not evaluate them. An article that leaves a technical term unexplained is not for that reason alone a bad article: it may be addressed to an audience for whom the term is familiar.

CONCLUSION

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The paper has presented a coding instrument that captures explanatory procedures, text functions and reader roles and thus makes comprehensibility describable as a relation. It does not deliver a result on the distribution of procedures in the two press landscapes; it delivers the instrument with which that distribution can be recorded. What remains open is the question of effect: whether the procedures recorded actually promote understanding can only be answered by a study with readers.

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