

Multi-dimensional Patterns of Variation among Legal Genres

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This paper will provide the results of using Multi-Dimensional (MD) analysis to study the overall patterns of genre variation among legal texts. The analysis has been carried out in a multi-genre corpus of texts exceeding 5,500,000 words and covering 7 major written genres. Factor analysis has been used to identify the systematic co-occurrence of patterns found among a large set of linguistic features.

The importance of linguistic co-occurrence has been widely recognized by many linguists. Brown and Fraser (1979:38-39) note that it is in fact ‘misleading to concentrate on specific, isolated markers without taking into account systematic variations which involve the occurrence of sets of markers’. Halliday (1988: 162) observes that a register should be defined as ‘a cluster of associated features having a greater-than-random... tendency to co-occur’. The MD approach makes it possible to analyze the correlation between the linguistic co-occurrence patterns and register variation in empirical and quantitative terms. Early MD studies focused on the patterns of variation among general spoken and written registers in English (see, e.g. Biber 1988) and in other languages (see, e.g. Biber 1995). More recently, the analysis was applied in studying specialized discourse domains, for instance, biology and history textbooks and journal articles (Conrad 2001), medical research articles (Biber & Finegan 2001) or university language (Biber 2006).

The results of the present study have been obtained after carrying out a completely new MD analysis (rather than applying the 1988 MD analysis) in order to identify the co-occurrence patterns specific to the domain of law. The study began with 129 linguistic features (see Appendix A in Biber 2006), however, these were reduced to 42 features that were conceptually distinct and could be utilized in a statistically meaningful manner. The solution for three factors was selected as optimal. Ultimately, three ‘dimensions’ have been identified, each with its own distinctive grouping of co-occurring linguistic features.

The occurrence patterns are then interpreted to assess the various functions shared by the linguistic features (cognitive, situational, social).

References

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