

Contextual Meanings of Legal Terminology in Press Discourse: Metaphorization And Semantic Narrowing/Widening

Usmonova Oyshajon Rozmatovna

TSUL, Acting Associate Professor, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: Legal terminology is traditionally associated with semantic precision, conceptual stability, and institutional regulation. However, when legal terms migrate from codified legal texts into press discourse, they frequently undergo contextual semantic transformation. This article examines the contextual meanings of legal terminology in press discourse, with particular attention to metaphorization and semantic narrowing/widening as mechanisms of semantic modification. Drawing on a comparative corpus of English-language and Uzbek-language newspapers, the research applies an integrated framework combining terminology theory, lexical semantics, and discourse analysis. The findings demonstrate that legal terms in press discourse acquire layered meanings shaped by rhetorical, ideological, and communicative factors. Metaphorization intensifies narrative framing, semantic widening enables evaluative and ideological extension, and semantic narrowing facilitates accessibility through simplification. The study argues that contextual semantic transformation reflects discursive adaptation rather than terminological degradation. These results contribute to legal linguistics, media discourse studies, and contemporary terminology theory by illustrating the dynamic interplay between institutional legal meaning and media-mediated public communication.

Keywords: Legal terminology, press discourse, contextual meaning, metaphorization, semantic narrowing, semantic widening, media linguistics, discourse analysis.

Introduction: Legal terminology has long been characterized by precision, definitional stability, and systematic organization within institutional frameworks. Classical terminology theory, particularly as articulated by Wüster (1979), emphasizes the principle of unicity, according to which a term ideally corresponds to a single concept within a structured knowledge system. In legal discourse, terminological precision ensures interpretative consistency, doctrinal coherence, and procedural fairness. Legal statutes, contracts, judicial opinions rely on carefully delimited lexical items whose meanings are codified within legal dictionaries and jurisprudential traditions. However, when legal terminology migrates from institutional legal discourse into press discourse, its semantic

behavior undergoes transformation. The media does not merely reproduce legal vocabulary; it recontextualizes it, reframes it, and adapts it for public consumption.

Press discourse operates at the intersection of institutional authority and public readership. As Bhatia (2004) observes, professional genres are often recontextualized when they move into non-specialist domains, leading to shifts in register, framing, and communicative intention. Legal terminology in newspapers thus occupies a hybrid position: it retains traces of its institutional origin while functioning within journalistic narrative structures. This dual positioning creates conditions for semantic modification. The concept of contextual meaning becomes central in this

regard. Contextual meaning refers to the interpretation of a lexical unit as shaped by co-text, genre conventions, audience expectations, and socio-ideological positioning. Unlike dictionary meaning, which reflects codified definitions, contextual meaning is dynamically constructed within discourse (Cruse, 2004). This study addresses the following research problem: how do legal terms undergo contextual semantic transformation in press discourse, specifically through metaphorization and semantic narrowing or widening? While legal language has been extensively examined within legal linguistics and forensic linguistics (Tiersma, 1999; Mellinkoff, 1963), comparatively less attention has been devoted to the systematic analysis of semantic shifts occurring in journalistic environments. Moreover, cross-linguistic perspectives remain underexplored. By examining English- and Uzbek-language press discourse, this study aims to identify patterns of contextual meaning formation and to evaluate their discursive motivations. The research seeks to demonstrate that metaphorization and semantic scope modification are not arbitrary distortions but communicatively motivated adaptations shaped by narrative construction, ideological framing, and audience design.

METHODOLOGY

The empirical basis of this study consists of a comparative corpus of newspaper articles published between 2022 and 2024 in English and Uzbek. The English-language corpus includes 50 articles from major newspapers and legal news platforms focusing on judicial decisions, political investigations, regulatory disputes, and public policy controversies. The Uzbek-language corpus similarly includes 50 articles addressing criminal proceedings, anti-corruption campaigns, administrative reforms, and constitutional matters. The total dataset comprises approximately 120,000 words. From this corpus, 120 legal terms were identified that have established codified meanings in legal dictionaries. The selection criteria required that the term (1) possess a stable institutional definition, (2) appear in journalistic context, and (3) exhibit observable semantic modification relative to its legal definition.

The analytical procedure followed four stages:

First, the institutional legal meaning of each term was

established using authoritative legal dictionaries and jurisprudential references.

Second, instances of the term in press discourse were extracted and contextualized within their textual environment.

Third, semantic comparison was conducted to determine whether the press usage reflected metaphorization, semantic widening, or semantic narrowing.

Fourth, discourse analysis was applied to interpret the communicative motivations underlying the transformation.

The methodological framework integrates terminology theory (Wüster, 1979; Cabré, 1999), lexical semantics (Cruse, 2004), and discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998). The comparative dimension allows identification of similarities and differences across linguistic contexts.

RESULTS

The analysis demonstrates that contextual meanings of legal terminology in press discourse are shaped primarily by three mechanisms: metaphorization, semantic widening, and semantic narrowing. Among the 120 terms examined, 48 displayed metaphorical extension, 41 showed semantic widening, and 31 reflected semantic narrowing. Metaphorization was especially frequent in headlines and opinion columns, whereas semantic narrowing appeared more often in explanatory reporting aimed at general audiences.

Metaphorization involves transferring a legal term from its institutional juridical domain to a new conceptual field through analogy. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue, metaphor functions as a cognitive mechanism structuring thought rather than merely as stylistic ornamentation. In press discourse, expressions such as “trial by media” reframe public scrutiny as a quasi-judicial process, symbolically assigning adjudicative authority to the media. Similarly, phrases like “legal battle” or “political prosecution” dramatize legal processes by embedding them within conflict narratives. This pattern was evident in both English and Uzbek press, though more frequent in English headlines.

Semantic widening occurs when a legal term extends beyond its technical definition. For example,

“corruption” often broadens from a statutory offense to a general moral failing, while “investigation” may denote journalistic inquiry rather than formal procedure. Conversely, semantic narrowing simplifies complex legal concepts; “liability” is frequently reduced to “fault,” omitting doctrinal distinctions. Such narrowing enhances accessibility but diminishes precision, particularly in explanatory reporting.

Table. The following table illustrates representative examples of contextual transformation identified in the corpus:

Legal Term	Institutional Legal Meaning	Press Usage Context	Type of Transformation	Analytical Interpretation
Trial	Formal judicial proceeding before a court	<i>“Trial by media has already begun.”</i>	Metaphorization	Judicial process mapped onto public scrutiny
Corruption	Statutory criminal offense involving bribery or abuse of office	<i>“Reforms aim to eliminate corruption in education.”</i>	Semantic Widening	Expansion from criminal act to moral/social misconduct
Appeal	Procedural request for review by higher court	<i>“The mayor appealed to voters.”</i>	Metaphorization	Transfer from legal procedure to rhetorical persuasion
Qonun-law	Davlat tomonidan qabul qilingan normativ-huquqiy hujjat	<i>“Bozorning o‘z qonunlari bor.”</i> (“The market has its own laws.”)	Metaphorization	Legal normativity metaphorically mapped onto economic regularities
Javobgarlik-liability	Legally enforceable responsibility	<i>“Kompaniya bo‘lgan baxtsiz hodisa uchun javobgarlikni o‘z bo‘yniga oldi”</i> (“The company accepted liability for the accident.”)	Semantic Narrowing	Reduction to general notion of fault
Claim-da‘vo	Sudga murojaat qilish orqali huquqiy talab bildirish	<i>“U o‘z haqiqatini himoya qilish uchun da‘vo bilan chiqdi.”</i> (“He made a claim to defend his truth.”)	Semantic Narrowing	Reduction from formal procedural claim to generalized assertion

The comparative analysis indicates that metaphorization is particularly prevalent in English-language headlines, consistent with journalistic traditions emphasizing dramatic framing. Uzbek-language press discourse demonstrates comparatively greater frequency of semantic narrowing, reflecting adaptation strategies for public comprehension in

contexts where legal literacy may vary. Nevertheless, both linguistic contexts reveal systematic transformation patterns rather than random deviation.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that contextual meaning in press discourse is multilayered, integrating denotative, connotative, and pragmatic dimensions. As Tiersma

(1999) observes, legal language in public communication oscillates between technical precision and accessibility, a tension clearly reflected in the transformations identified in this study. Metaphorization increases narrative engagement by framing legal processes within culturally familiar schemas, while semantic widening enables legal terms to function as evaluative tools in socio-political critique. Semantic narrowing, in turn, reflects adaptation for non-specialist audiences. These processes correspond to van Dijk's (1998) view that lexical choices shape cognitive and ideological framing. Widened terms such as "corruption" extend moral boundaries beyond statutory meaning, and metaphorized expressions like "trial" symbolically reassign judicial authority to public discourse. Rather than representing terminological decline, such shifts illustrate genre-based recontextualization (Bhatia, 2004). Cross-linguistic comparison shows universal mechanisms but differing stylistic emphases shaped by journalistic culture and socio-legal context.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated contextual meanings of legal terminology in press discourse, focusing on metaphorization and semantic narrowing and widening. Through comparative analysis of English- and Uzbek-language newspapers, the research demonstrated that legal terms frequently acquire modified meanings shaped by rhetorical framing, audience adaptation, and ideological positioning. Metaphorization reassigns legal concepts to new narrative domains, semantic widening generalizes technical definitions into broader evaluative categories, and semantic narrowing simplifies doctrinal complexity for accessibility. These transformations do not undermine terminological integrity but reflect systematic discursive mediation between institutional knowledge and public communication. The findings contribute to legal linguistics and media discourse studies by highlighting the dynamic interaction between codified legal meaning and contextual interpretation.

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