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| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Language Acceptability of Texts in Legal Education：A Case Study from the Perspective of LCT Semantic Density

Wentao Xu
Associate Professor, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies / Guangdong AIB Polytechnic, Guangzhou, China
Corresponding Author: Wentao Xu, **E-mail**: xwt6@sina.com

| **ABSTRACT**

Language acceptability can be defined as the interaction of complexity and context-dependence of meanings, or semantic density and semantic gravity in Legitimation Code Theory (LCT). This study explores language acceptability in legal education through the lens of semantic density in LCT. Using an American judicial opinion as the data, this study demonstrates how language acceptability can be explored at three levels—text, sentence and word through the analysis of semantic density. The dynamics of language acceptability is also taken into account. This study can serve as a reference for evaluating the language acceptability of legal texts, thereby offering a tool for teaching legal language.

1. Introduction

The characteristics of legal language have been discussed for a long time (Du, 2004:1-17; Liao, 2006; Coulthard et al., 2017: 9-12, 31-49 et al.), including the acceptability of legal language. In legal education, legal students are trained to utilize these features of legal language. Judicial judgements/opinions are among the most important types of texts legal students are asked to practice composing, as those would-be judges should draft judicial judgements/opinions with higher language acceptability (Liu et al., 207:60-70).

Acceptability is often explored as a key aspect in many disciplines, but it still lacks a viable definition, although the researchers have pointed out that the factors affecting the acceptability of language, including word, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, rhetoric, context, culture, etc. and then based on these factors, further research is conducted into reading and writing abilities in language acquisition. Besides, language acceptability is always taken as a static phenomenon, but its dynamic aspect is always overlooked.

Language acceptability is one of the key factors to be considered in writing judgment documents in judicial areas. There have been studies on the acceptability of judgment documents from stylistics (Xiong, 2002, etc.), jurisprudence (Sun, 2010), rhetoric (Zhang, 2011:194-195; Peng, 2014:86-87; He, 2015:145-148; Liu, 2020, et al.) and Critical Comment Analysis (Zhen, 2006, et al.). However, the existing studies are all qualitative discussions of the language acceptability of judicial opinions, while the quantitative analysis of language is insufficient.

The dimension of Semantics in the sociological theory of Legitimation Code Theory (hereafter LCT) deals with complexity and context-dependence of meaning (Maton, 2014). The less complex and more context-dependent, the more acceptable the

meanings are, or vice versa. Based on the relationship between the complexity and context-dependence of meanings and the acceptability of language, given the importance of language acceptability in legal education and the shortage of dynamic and quantitative analysis of language acceptability in judicial judgements/opinions, this study firstly redefines the concept of language acceptability based on the dimension of Semantics in LCT, and then, using semantic density of LCT Semantics, quantitatively explores the dynamic changes of language acceptability in judicial opinions at the levels of text, sentence and word. This could provide a tool for teaching language acceptability in legal education.

2. Semantic density in LCT and its translation devices
2.1 LCT Semantics and the definition of language acceptability
LCT as a multidimensional sociological, includes many dimensions (Zhu, 2015:16-25; Maton, 2014, 2019). As one of the dimensions, Semantics are approached from two perspectives: semantic density and semantic gravity. Semantic gravity (hereafter SG) refers to the context-dependence of meaning: when specific details change into a general overview, SG weakens; When abstract concepts become specific instances, SG increases. Semantic density (hereafter SD) refers to the complexity of discourse meaning. When more meanings are compressed into a concept, or a concept is associated with or related to other concepts, SD increases; On the contrary, if the meaning of a concept is decomposed, the semantic density is weakened.

Within the framework of LCT, we can define language acceptability as a feature of the process of reader-friendly accumulating knowledge building which manifest itself under the interactive effect of semantic complexity and context dependence. The less dependent on the context the meaning is, the more semantically complex it is, i.e. the weaker the SG is, the lower the acceptability of the language is. Conversely, the more dependent on the context, the lower the semantic complexity is and the higher the acceptability of the language. The acceptability of language is inversely proportional to its semantic density and directly proportional to its semantic gravity. Semantic density is the primary factor, which affects the change of semantic gravity. In this study, we just focus on language acceptability based on semantic density.

2.2 The translation devices for semantic density
Translation devices in LCT are used to link abstract concepts to the data. Maton & Doran (2017) proposed translation devices for epistemic semantic density in English discourse. It includes four general kinds of tools: wording, word-grouping, clausing and sequencing. The first type of tools focuses on the complexity at a specific word level in a discourse, while the others are used to analyze the complexity of meanings in a group, phase and discourse respectively. As we are dealing with the data concerning the complexity of words, we are just concerned with the first type.

As for the wording tool, according to whether understanding of the meanings of words needs to be limited to a specific field of knowledge practice, it can be divided into **technical words** and **everyday words**. **Conglomerate technical words** usually consist of several components, each of which has a technical meaning, like compounds made up of multiple roots. It can be further distinguished whether it is a property or an entity. There are few such words in legal discourse, but to highlight some core legal concepts, we classify some of them into conglomerate technical words. Examples of **conglomerate technical entity words** are "jurisdiction", and "litigation", and examples of **conglomerate technical property words** include "immunity" in our data. Different from the conglomerate, **compact technical word** contains only one part indicating a certain technical meaning. It is also divided into **property** and **entity**. The former such as "proceeding", "hearing", "judgement", "immune", "Judicial", "reversed", "decided", The latter include "statute", "respondent", "opinion", "cause", "suit", "appeal", "complaint", "act". Most of these compact technical words are polysemy and are used in judicial opinions with their professional meanings in the legal field. **Consolidated everyday** words are those from things that come from the transformation of a process or quality. They are **specialist consolidated everyday words** if used in a discourse dominated by technical ones, like "authority", "violation", "approval", "statement", "claim", "validity"; g**eneralist consolidated everyday** words are used in discourses dominated by everyday words, such as "appointment", "omission", "operation", "correctness", "treatment", "formality" and "implication". The difference between the two types of **consolidated everyday words** lies in whether the context in which they are used is a professional field or not. These words are mainly covered by the nominalization originated in verbs or adjectives. **Common everyday words** are distinctly congruent verbs and adjectives. Among them, those with more subtle meanings are called **nuanced common everyday words**, such as "approved", "performed", "accordingly", "principles", "process", "judge" and "parties"; The ones with less meaning are termed as plain **common everyday words**, such as "mother", "time", "married", "told", "significant". For a quantitative study, we assign values according to their epistemic semantic density from strong to weak, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Wording tool for SD and its assigned values

ESD	Types	Subtype	Sub-subtype	Points
Stronger ↑ Weaker ↓	technical	conglomerate	-properties	8
			-elements	7
		compact	-properties	6
			-elements	5
	everyday	consolidated	specialist	4
			generalist	3
		common	nuanced	2
			plain	1

3．Data and method

The study takes a case study on the judicial opinion for the Stump v. Sparkman case (435 U.S. 349 (1978)). This case reestablished the principle of judicial immunity for judicial officers, thus the text is of high quality. In this case, Judge Stump unilaterally granted a mother's petition to have her daughter sterilized. The daughter and her husband later sued Judge Stump, the mother and others for infertility caused by the sterilization. The issue in this case is whether the judge enjoys judicial immunity. The detailed information for the data is in Table 2.

Table 2 The data

Stages	Tokens
Syllabus	716
Opinion	3048
Dissenting 1	1258
Dissenting 2	329
Total	5356

This study aims to answer: how does language acceptability at the levels of text, sentence and word change based on semantic density with the discourse unfolding through different generic stages in the judicial opinion?

To look at language acceptability at the levels of text and sentence, the specific analysis goes through the following steps: (1) Word lists are created out of the data using KH Coder and values of semantic density are assigned to each word based on the key-value pair set out in Table 1. The value for function words and proper nouns is "0"(zero) （see the sample pairs in Table 3. The process is conducted by two researchers at the same time. Their results are compared to get rid out of some with significant differences until the results are well accepted by two researchers. (2) The data are segmented into sentences. Each sentence is further divided into words. Values are assigned to each word. (3) The semantic density values for all words in each sentence are added up, and then the total of values is divided by the number of content words in the sentence for standardization of semantic density of sentences. (4) The semantic density of sentences from different stages is calculated and a curve graph is drawn to show the change in semantic density, i.e. a semantic profile is created.

Table 3 Sample of the assignment of values

Words	POS	TF	Values	Words	POS	TF	Values
			1	…	…	…	…
be	Verb	220					0
he	PRP	112	0	whichever	W	1	
Court	ProperNoun	63	0	whom	W	1	0
judicial	Adj	62	6	whose	W	1	0
…	…	…	…				1
				wish	Noun	1	

To dynamically approach language acceptability at the level of word, the steps followed include: (1) run KH Coder to generate co-occurrence of main words in the judicial opinion, namely some major meaning clusters; (2) based on the legal issue of the judicial opinion, the key words for analysis are selected, and all related words are obtained from the data using KH Coder (Koichi 2016, 2017).

4. Semantic density analysis of language acceptability in a judicial opinion

This section explores language acceptability using LCT semantic density wording tool from three aspects: the use of different word types in the text and the changes in language acceptability across different parts, the use of word types within each sentence and the changes in language acceptability across the text and the changes of semantic density of individual words. These three aspects reflect three levels of language acceptability: text, sentence and word, and the dynamics of language acceptability.
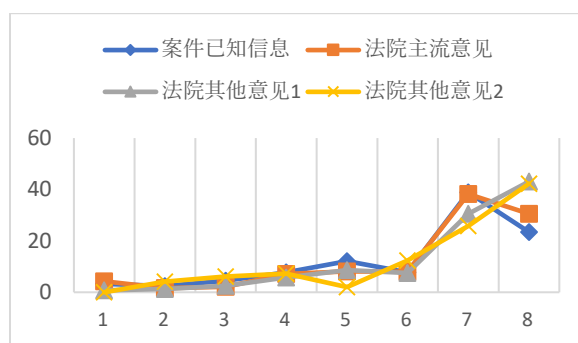
Judicial opinions as a genre (see Martin, 2012:55-057 and Martin & Rose, 2008:6 for genre; see Lu & Yuan 2021:71-93 for judicial opinion as a genre) in judicial practice are realized through a generic structure: (judgment history) ^ case facts ^ disputed issue(s) ^ reasoning process ^ conclusion ^ judgment ^ (different opinions) (Enriquez & Lindsay, 2015, et al.).The round brackets mean the elements are optional, and the carat sign ^ means "followed by". The generic structure adopted in this study is as follows: **known case information ^ majority judges' opinion ^ dissenting opinions**, in which "known case information" includes judgment history, case facts and disputed issue(s), and majority judges' opinions include reasoning process, conclusion and judgment. There may be two or more dissenting opinions.

4.1 Language acceptability of the text as a whole

Language ability for a text is approached by looking at the use of different word types across the text based on semantic density wording tool. The use of the eight kinds of words according to wording tools for epistemic semantic density is shown in Table 4 and Figure 1.

Table 4: Distribution of the eight kinds of wording tools at the four stages

			known case information		*majority judges' opinions*		*dissenting opinion 1*		*dissenting opinion 2*	
			Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
technical	conglomerate	1-properties	8	3.24	39	4.2	3	0.76	0	0
		2-elements	6	2.43	15	1.61	5	1.26	4	4.12
	compact	3-properties	11	4.45	20	2.15	10	2.52	6	6.19
		4-elements	19	7.69	66	7.1	23	5.79	7	7.22
everyday	consolidated	5-specialist	30	12.15	76	8.18	34	8.56	2	2.06
		6-generalist	19	7.69	74	7.97	30	7.56	12	12.37
	common	7-nuanced	96	38.87	355	38.21	121	30.48	25	25.77
		8-plain	58	23.48	284	30.57	171	43.07	41	42.27
			247		929		397		97	

Figure 1 Distribution of different wording tools at the four stages

Table 4 shows that the four types of everyday words, including 5-specialist, 6-generralist, 7-nuanced and 8-plain, account for more than 82% at all generic stages. That is to say, most of the words used in the judicial opinion are everyday words. The changes in semantic density of 8 types of word tools across different generic stages of the judicial opinion demonstrate almost the same tendency (as is shown in Figure 1), but the proportion of everyday words in the "known case information stage" and the majority judges' opinion stage is slightly lower than that in dissenting opinion stages. This may be because these two stages use more technical words to show what judicial procedures have been followed, and what the judicial opinion thinks of the case facts from

As for technical words, element words are used more frequently than property words. Property words are mostly used to modify entities or explain features, while element words are mostly used as participants of events. Therefore, we can say that in judicial opinions, the author employs more element words, as they can express concepts much more directly and accurately.

In general, the language acceptability of judicial opinions can be enhanced by using everyday words with weaker semantic density, as potential readers of judicial opinions are mostly the general public in addition to the judicial professionals. Therefore, everyday words must be the main choice, in order to make sure the opinions can be understood. However, as written texts, judicial opinions, especially in terms of the discoursal reconstruction or re-contextualization of various aspects of the court trial (Bernstein 1981:327-363.), naturally need information integration, and technical words are often used for such a purpose. With technical words, the texts will be more formal. This explains why elements are preferred to property words. In addition, judicial opinions mainly convey clear concepts, while element words can better summarize different concepts than property words.

4.2 Language acceptability of sentences
This section examines language ability at the level of sentence based on the semantic density word types discussed in Section 4.1. The specific steps are as follows: add up the values of the semantic density of each word in each sentence and divide the sum by the number of content words in the corresponding sentence. The result of each division can be used to indicate the language ability of a sentence; Then, the average value of sentences for each stage is calculated to examine the dynamic of language acceptability at the level of sentence.

For example, a sentence in the case history stage from the data is analyzed in terms of its semantic density using wording tool. The upper number indicates the value of semantic density for the word.

> *A mother[1] filed[2] a petition[4] in affidavit[5] form[1] in an Indiana Circuit Court, a court[2] of general[1] jurisdiction[8] under an Indiana statute[5], for authority[4] to have[1] her "somewhat[1] retarded[2]" 15-year-old[1] daughter[1] (a respondent[5] here) sterilized[2], and petitioner[4] Circuit Judge approved[2] the petition[4] the same[1] day[1] in an ex parte[2] proceeding[6] without a hearing[4] and without notice[4] to the daughter[1] or appointment[3] of a guardian[4] ad litem[2].*

The sum of values using the wood tool is 90, with proper nouns excluded from our analysis. There are 32 content words, and the meaning complexity of this sentence is 2.81. See Table 5 for details. Figure 3 more clearly shows the trend of meaning complexity in discourse development.

Table 5: Average meaning complexity of sentences in different stages

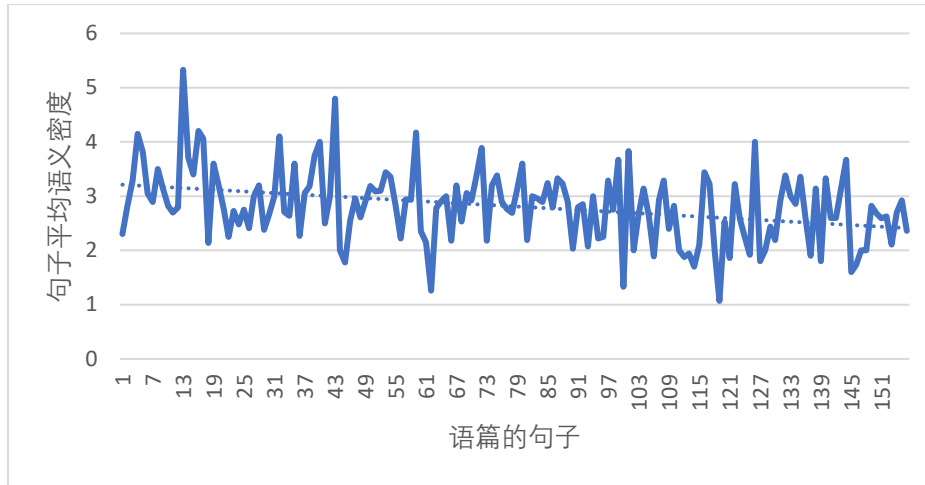| Generic Stage	known case information	majority judges' opinions	dissenting opinion 1	dissenting opinion 2
Meaning complexity	3.15	2.79	2.44	2.43
No. of sentence	1-19	20-101	102-149	150-158

Figure 2: The trend of meaning complexity of sentences

As is shown in Table 5 and Figure 2, the value for the complexity of sentence meaning in the judicial opinion is between 2.5 and 3.5, which is in the low range of 1-8, thus indicating that the complexity of judicial opinion is relatively low. The oblique line from left to right in Figure 3 shows the overall trend of the complexity of meaning: as the discourse unfolds, the complexity of meaning gradually decreases. The most complex part is the introduction of known information such as the statement of case facts, while the complexity of meaning of the judge's opinion is further reduced, especially the complexity of the dissenting opinions is much lower.

LCT researchers in their study on Semantics dimension propose three kinds of semantic profiles to describe the dynamic movement of meaning changes (Maton & Doran 2017:70-71). Among them, semantic wave of semantic density deals with the situation where semantic density gradually decrease by unpacking from a strong point and then gradually increase by packing, leading to the creation of a wave of meaning. Figure 2 shows the continuous decrease of semantic density, which belongs to the part of the unpacking process of a semantic wave. This process reflects that judicial staff apply the law from a certain legal perspective by combining judicial precedents with the relevant law in judging the basic facts of legal cases, so as to reach a verdict acceptable to the relevant parties and the general public.

The l low language acceptability in the judicial opinion in general can ensure the acceptance and dissemination of corresponding legal reasoning. The purpose of communication is slightly different in different language stages. The statement of case facts is mainly to briefly introduce the main facts of the case, which needs to be concise and comprehensive, while the main part of judicial opinions is to present the judge's legal reasoning and judgment, which needs to be clear and comprehensible. The stages of majority judges' opinion and dissenting opinion both has to be further reduced in complexity to make them better understood. Therefore, judicial opinions increase the acceptability of language by adjusting semantic density to ensure the realization of their social purpose.

4.3 Language acceptability of individual words
The above analysis demonstrates how to analyze language acceptability of the judicial opinion by taking words as a static unit of meaning. However, the words also undergo some variation of semantic density with the unfolding of the judicial opinion. This also has some influence on language acceptability. This section further approaches language acceptability by looking at the semantic density of individual words.

With the unfolding of the judicial opinion, more relations between meanings are developed and clusters of meanings are created. Relationality of meanings can represent their strength of semantic density, that is to say, "the more meanings are related, the stronger semantic density". (Maton & Doran 2017) Thus, as the judicial opinion develops textually, some words enrich their meanings in the discourse. This can be explored from the prominent relevant meaning clusters centering on the words.

With textual development, the semantic density of a single word goes through a dynamic change as a word gradually associates itself with more words. This section first takes a general look at the whole data in terms of its meaning relationality and then takes some core words as an example to show what are the characteristics of change for semantic density of some specific words, and further examines the acceptability of language.

Figure 3 shows that there are four main meaning clusters in the data. Combined with topic-related content words with the higher frequencies in Table 6, the four meaning clusters of the main core words and their inter-relations are as follows: In the first cluster, "judicial" is associated with "immunity" and "act", and with "judge" through "be" verb and personal pronoun "he", and with "jurisdiction" through "be" verb and the negative adverb "not". In the second cluster, "petition" is associated with "Court" through "Judge", and further associated with "approval" and "addiction" respectively. "Judge" is also associated with "Appeal" through "Court". The uppercase "Judge" and "Stump" are the same person, representing the uppercase "Court", and they have the same reference. In the third cluster, "err" is related to "procedural" and "process", "err" is related to "immune" through "liability", and "err" is related to "damages". In the fourth meaning cluster, "normally" is first associated with "she", "daughter", "mother", and "capacity" through "perform".

Four meaning clusters constitute the main claims of facts and the main disputes of the case in the data. The first cluster is the main dispute of the case, whether Judge Stump enjoys judicial immunity and whether the corresponding court has jurisdiction. The second cluster deals with the main facts of the case, namely that the accused mother submitted a petition for her daughter's sterilization to the court, which was approved by Judge Stump on behalf of the court. The third cluster further integrates the meanings of the first two clusters, that is, whether there are procedural problems in the way of Stump judge's approval of the sterilization, whether he enjoys immunity and whether he is immune from liability for damages. The fourth cluster further complements the basic information of the case in which a mother applied for surgery for her daughter on a routine basis. In each meaning cluster, the core words are associated with other words and thus have richer meaning relations. Therefore, the semantic density of these words is enhanced through the process of discourse development.
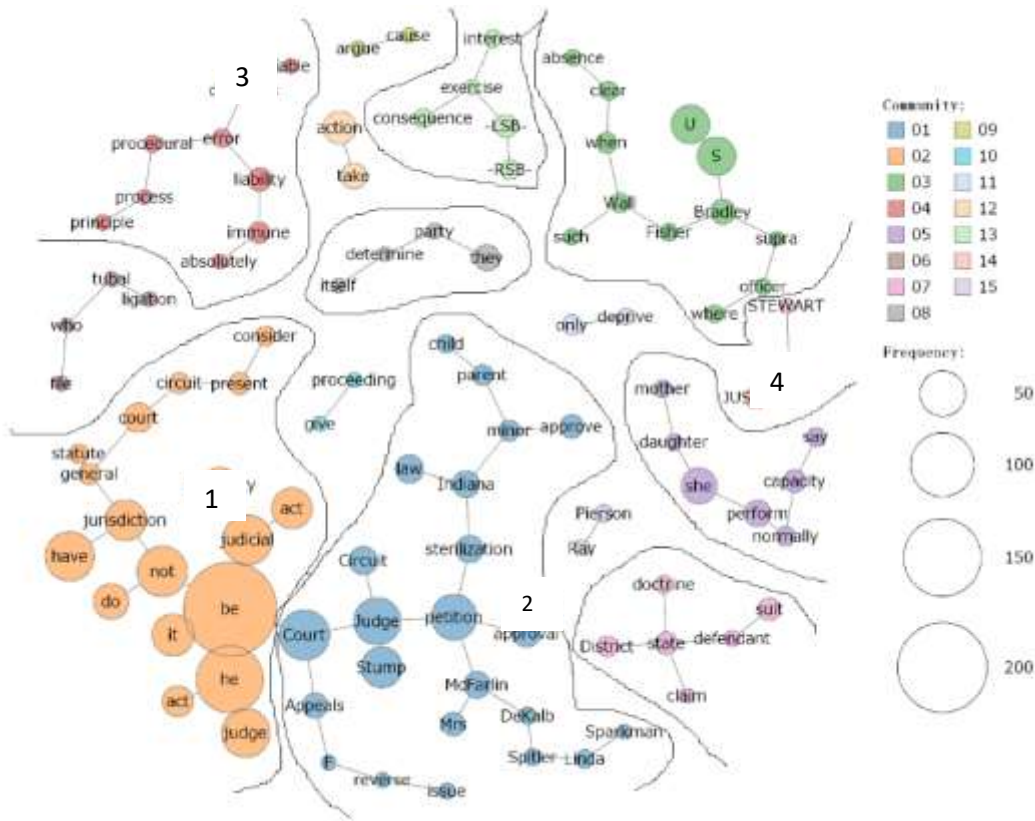
Figure 3 Clustering of meanings in the data

Table 6 The frequencies of core words in the data

Words	Freq	Words	Freq	Words	Freq
judicial	62	law	19	opinion	12
judge	58	approval	18	state	12
petition	51	sterilization	18	suit	12
jurisdiction	41	perform	17	general	11
act	40	hold	16	immune	11
immunity	29	take	16	present	11
case	28	respondent	15	authority	10
action	26	approve	13	circuit	10
act	23	liability	13	damages	10
court	21	capacity	12	minor	10

The analysis of the meaning clusters above shows that words are constantly associated with other words in terms of meaning in the course of discourse development, and the semantic density of words is gradually increasing. According to the study on "degrees of epistemological condensation or the strengthening of ESD" (Maton & Doran) 2017:56-57), in the process of discourse unfolding, any word will have more associations to varying degrees, its meaning will become more refined, and it will respond more to other components in the meaning cluster.

This study only takes the core keywords "immune/immunity" and "judge" as examples (see Table 7) to illustrate how the semantic density of specific words changes together with the creation of meaning clusters.

First, "immunity" in the data is defined as: *absolute immunity from civil liability that is granted to judges and other court officers (as prosecutors and grand juries) and quasi-judicial officials for tortious acts or omissions done within the scope of their jurisdiction or*

authority）(Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of Law 1996). Keywords in this definition include: "judicial", "liability", "hold", "entitle", "judge", "act", "mission".

Table 6 shows that the words most closely related to "immune/immunity" in the data are quite consistent with the key words in the definition, because it is through this case that the doctrine or principle of judicial immunity is established, and "doctrine" and "U. S." are also listed in the table, indicating that judicial immunity has become a legal principle in the United States. The table also contains two words of negative meaning, "not" and "refute", which suggest that judicial immunity can be deprived. Although the definition of judicial immunity comes from this case, compared with the concepts in the definition, the semantic density of "immune/immunity" is stronger through the judicial opinion in the data, for the simple reason that more relations are created with the unfolding of discourse.

The second word "judge" is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as "*a person in a court who has the authority to decide how criminals should be punished or to make legal decisions*". Table 7 shows that "act" and "action" of a judge in the corpus are subject to certain "jurisdiction" thus being "judicial" and enjoy judicial "immunity". In the present case, "judge" implemented certain "action" and judicial "act" on a certain petition as a representative of the "court". Obviously, the semantic density of "judge" here is stronger than that of "judge" in the definition, **for the same reason as that for "immune/immunity"**.

More individual words can be investigated in the same way and the same findings can be obtained, only with some variation in the degrees of strength of semantic density increased when the discourse comes to an end. Some core and frequently used words will increase much greatly

In conclusion, the semantic density of each word in the discourse increases slightly subtly with the unfolding of the discourse. In terms of specific vocabulary, the acceptability of language in judicial opinions is reduced slightly, but at the micro level, the change of language acceptability within a small size of data is usually not easy to feel, and it usually truly achieve the change of acceptability of language only through personal development or even the evolution of language system, but it takes much longer time.

Table 7 Words associated with "immune/immunity" and "judge"

Immune/immunity		judge	
words	Jaccard	words	Jaccard
judicial	0.3091	he	0.4941
action	0.2308	Stump	0.4935
doctrine	0.2143	be	0.4559
liability	0.2121	Court	0.3265
he	0.2031	petition	0.3222
hold	0.2	not	0.3093
U. S.	0.1875	have	0.3085
deprive	0.1852	judicial	0.2979
entitle	0.1852	jurisdiction	0.2857
judge	0.1695	action	0.2564
not	0.1667	act	0.2326
Bradley	0.1667	act	0.2222
be	0.1654	immunity	0.2093
Judge	0.1563	do	0.2069
suit	0.1471	it	0.2043

5. Conclusion

This study, from the perspective of LCT Semantics, defines language acceptability as resulting from the interaction of complexity (semantic density) and context dependence (semantic gravity) of meanings, and then discusses the language acceptability of a judicial opinion based on the semantic density wording tool. As is found from the data, the decreasing tendency of semantic density in the judicial opinion improves the language acceptability. Based on the analysis of semantic density word tools, language acceptability of legal texts is approached dynamically from three levels: text, sentence and word. This study provides a method for evaluating language acceptability in legal texts in legal education. The key to understanding language acceptability based on semantic density is to create a wordlist of 8 types of words. The legal educationists can work together. Other tasks for educationists

include: to get the semantic density for each sentence and to create the clusters of meanings centering on individual words. Different tools and AI may help.

Further research will focus on how to scale up the analysis, focusing on the effect of other translation devices for language acceptability as well as the analysis of the influence of semantic gravity on language acceptability, and how semantic density and semantic gravity interact to adjust language acceptability is also of great interest and importance. Future work will carry on with the analysis of more data, using the present research procedure, to unveil more hidden features in discourse in terms of semantic change.

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