

Language as Evidence: Implementing Forensic Linguistics as an Interdisciplinary University Course and Its Perspectives for Legal and Military Education

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Abstract

In contemporary legal, institutional, and security-oriented environments, language increasingly functions not only as a medium of communication but also as evidence, the interpretation of which may influence legal reasoning, institutional decision-making, intelligence assessment, and strategic analysis. The expansion of digital communication, anonymous and threatening texts, disputed authorship, cyber discourse, and propaganda narratives has revealed the limitations of purely intuitive or exclusively legal approaches to textual interpretation. Against this background, forensic linguistics has become an increasingly relevant applied linguistic discipline concerned with the systematic analysis of language in legal and evidential contexts. The paper presents a pilot interdisciplinary and bilingual model for integrating selected elements of forensic linguistics into legal foreign language education, specifically within Legal English and Legal German instruction. The model was implemented as a preliminary instructional experience rather than as a full-scale empirical study. At the beginning of the semester, an orientation questionnaire was administered to 88 students in order to identify their expectations, perceived difficulties, and learning needs in relation to legal foreign language education and language-related legal analysis. Of these students, 58 were enrolled in Legal English and 30 in Legal German. During the following three months, selected forensic linguistic topics were introduced as separate instructional modules within both courses. The most important feature of the model was its interdisciplinary design. Case materials were provided by specialists from the Faculty of Law and were based on real legal and quasi-legal situations, with full protection of anonymity and confidentiality. Linguists adapted these materials into terminology-based, discourse-analytical, and case-based learning tasks. After three months of instruction, students' knowledge of legal terminology and their ability to analyze language-related legal materials were reassessed on the basis of the topics covered. The pilot experience suggests that forensic linguistic modules can strengthen students' terminological competence, increase their motivation, and develop their awareness of language as evidence. The paper argues that such a model can serve as a sustainable transitional step toward establishing forensic linguistics as an independent interdisciplinary university course with relevance for legal, institutional, and military-educational contexts.

Key words: *Forensic linguistics, legal language education, terminology, evidence, and interdisciplinary analysis.*

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1. Introduction

The role of language in contemporary legal and security-oriented environments has changed substantially. Language is no longer understood merely as a neutral communicative instrument. In many institutional, legal, and digital contexts, language becomes a form of evidence, a trace of authorship, a marker of intention, a medium of manipulation, and a possible indicator of risk. Legal disputes, witness statements, threatening messages, anonymous communication, police interviews, cyber aggression, propaganda narratives, and institutional documents all demonstrate that linguistic interpretation may have

legal, social, and strategic consequences. Forensic linguistics has developed as an applied linguistic field that examines the relationship between language, law, and evidence. It deals with such areas as authorship attribution, threatening communication, police interviews, courtroom discourse, legal drafting, disputed meanings, plagiarism, cyber communication, and the analysis of written or spoken evidence. Coulthard, Johnson, and Wright (2017) conceptualize forensic linguistics through the central notion of language in evidence, while Gibbons (2003) emphasizes the importance of analyzing language within authentic justice-system contexts. Similarly, Olsson (2008) and Shuy (2006) demonstrate that forensic linguistic analysis is most valuable when linguistic expertise supports, but does not replace, legal reasoning. Despite its increasing international relevance, forensic linguistics remains insufficiently institutionalized in many university systems. Students of law, linguistics, translation, foreign languages, and security-related disciplines often receive limited systematic training in how language may function as evidence. This creates a gap between contemporary professional needs and university curricula. One possible way to address this gap is to introduce forensic linguistics initially through pilot modules within existing legal foreign language courses.

The present paper describes such a pilot instructional model implemented within Legal English and Legal German instruction. The model was not designed as a full-scale quantitative study, but as an exploratory teaching experience supported by an orientation questionnaire and a follow-up assessment. Its main purpose was to examine whether selected forensic linguistic elements could enrich legal foreign language education and prepare the ground for a future independent course in forensic linguistics. The model involved 88 students, including 58 students enrolled in Legal English and 30 students enrolled in Legal German. At the beginning of the semester, students completed an orientation questionnaire concerning their expectations, perceived difficulties, and learning needs. During the following three months, selected forensic linguistic topics were introduced as separate instructional modules. The case materials were provided by specialists from the Faculty of Law and were based on real legal or quasi-legal situations. However, all materials were fully anonymized and pedagogically adapted in order to protect confidentiality and ensure ethical use in the classroom.

The aim of the paper is threefold: first, to justify the integration of forensic linguistic elements into legal foreign language education; second, to present a bilingual and interdisciplinary model implemented in Legal English and Legal German; and third, to argue that such pilot modules may serve as a transitional step toward establishing forensic linguistics as an independent university-level course with legal, institutional, and military-educational relevance.

2. Theoretical Background: Forensic Linguistics and Legal Foreign Language Education

Forensic linguistics is generally understood as the application of linguistic knowledge, methods, and analytical procedures to legal and evidential contexts. It includes both the study of legal language and the analysis of language as evidence. The first direction concerns legal documents, courtroom communication, police interviews, legal drafting, and institutional discourse. The second direction focuses on the evidential value of linguistic material, including disputed authorship, threatening communication, anonymous messages, confessions, witness statements, digital discourse, and contested meanings.

The concept of language as evidence is central to forensic linguistics. A text may become evidentially relevant when it contains linguistic traces of authorship, intention, coercion, threat, stance, identity, or manipulation. Such traces may appear at different linguistic levels: lexical choice, syntactic structure, punctuation, spelling habits, discourse markers, pragmatic implication, genre conventions, stylistic repetition, or patterns of politeness and aggression. However, responsible forensic linguistic analysis does not rely on impressionistic judgement. It requires methodological transparency, careful description, comparison, and cautious interpretation (Grant, 2010; Nini, 2023).

This principle is especially important in education. Students must understand that linguistic analysis does not determine legal guilt or innocence. Rather, it identifies language patterns that may support, weaken, or clarify legal hypotheses. In this sense, forensic linguistics offers an ideal framework for interdisciplinary teaching because it requires cooperation between legal and linguistic perspectives. Legal specialists formulate juridically relevant questions, while linguists analyze the linguistic data using appropriate methods.

The integration of forensic linguistics into Legal English and Legal German is also supported by the principles of language for specific purposes. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argue that specialized language teaching should be based on learners' needs, professional contexts, and target communicative situations. Swales (1990) further emphasizes the importance of genre, discourse communities, and communicative purpose in academic and professional communication. These principles are directly relevant to legal foreign language education, where students must not only memorize terminology but also understand how legal meanings are produced in discourse.

Traditional Legal English and Legal German courses often focus on terminology, reading comprehension, translation, and professional communication. These components are necessary but insufficient if students are expected to interpret language in complex legal or institutional contexts. Forensic linguistic modules add an analytical dimension to legal foreign language instruction. They allow students to understand legal vocabulary not as isolated lexical units, but as part of evidential, institutional, and discursive processes.

For example, terms such as evidence, testimony, confession, threat, intent, liability, authorship, and coercion in English, or Beweis, Zeugenaussage, Geständnis, Drohung, Absicht, Haftung, Autorschaft, and Nötigung in German, become more meaningful when studied through authentic or semi-authentic cases. In this way, legal terminology is connected with context, function, genre, and communicative intention.

3. Methodological Design of the Pilot Instructional Model

The present paper is based on a pilot interdisciplinary instructional model rather than a full-scale empirical study. Its purpose was exploratory and pedagogical: to test whether forensic linguistic modules could be meaningfully integrated into existing legal foreign language courses and whether such integration could contribute to students' terminological and analytical competence.

The pilot model consisted of four stages:

1. an orientation questionnaire at the beginning of the semester;
2. development of forensic linguistic modules in cooperation with the Faculty of Law;
3. three months of module-based instruction in Legal English and Legal German;
4. follow-up assessment of students' legal terminology and analytical competence.

The participants were 88 students. Of these, 58 students attended Legal English and 30 students attended Legal German. At the beginning of the semester, students completed an orientation questionnaire. The questionnaire did not aim to produce statistically generalizable results. Rather, it served as a diagnostic and pedagogical tool for identifying students' expectations, perceived difficulties, and learning needs.

The orientation questionnaire focused on the following issues:

- students' expectations regarding legal foreign language instruction;
- difficulties in learning legal terminology in English or German;
- difficulties in understanding specialized legal texts;
- interest in case-based and practice-oriented learning;
- awareness of the role of language in legal evidence;
- interest in topics such as anonymous communication, threats, authorship, interrogation discourse, cyber communication, and propaganda analysis.

The responses indicated that students expected legal foreign language instruction to be more practice-oriented and connected with realistic professional situations. They reported difficulties not only in memorizing legal terminology, but also in interpreting legal terms within specific contexts. A recurring issue was the gap between lexical knowledge and discourse competence: students could often recognize individual legal terms, but found it more difficult to understand how these terms function in statements, cases, documents, or institutional communication.

On the basis of the questionnaire, selected forensic linguistic topics were introduced over a three-month period. The modules were implemented in both Legal English and Legal German. The content was adapted to each language, but the conceptual structure remained common: language as evidence, terminology in context, threatening and anonymous communication, authorship, institutional discourse, digital communication, and propaganda analysis.

The most significant methodological feature of the model was cooperation with the Faculty of Law. Specialists from the Faculty of Law provided real or realistically based case materials, examples of legal problems, relevant terminology, and juridically meaningful scenarios. All materials were anonymized before being used in the classroom. Personal names, identifying details, institutional references, and sensitive information were removed or modified. The purpose was to preserve the authenticity and professional relevance of the materials while ensuring ethical responsibility and full protection of anonymity.

Linguists then transformed these materials into pedagogical tasks. These tasks included terminology exercises, text interpretation, discourse analysis, comparison of statements, identification of speech acts, analysis of threatening formulations, and discussion of possible evidential value. This cooperation allowed the course to maintain both legal relevance and linguistic methodological control.

After three months of instruction, students' progress was assessed through tasks based on the covered materials. The follow-up assessment examined students' knowledge of legal terminology, their ability to interpret short legal or quasi-legal texts, and their awareness of language-related evidential issues. The aim was not to measure long-term professional expertise, but to observe whether students' understanding of legal terminology and forensic linguistic concepts had improved after module-based instruction.

4. Structure of the Integrated Modules

4.1. Module 1: Legal Terminology in Context

The first module focused on legal terminology and its contextual interpretation. Students worked with key legal terms in English and German. In Legal English, the module included terms such as *evidence*, *witness statement*, *confession*, *intent*, *liability*, *threat*, *coercion*, and *authorship*. In Legal German, Students worked with *Beweis*, *Zeugenaussage*, *Geständnis*, *Absicht*, *Haftung*, *Drohung*, *Nötigung*, and *Autorschaft*.

The aim was to move beyond memorization and to show students that legal terminology functions within specific institutional and communicative contexts. A term may have one meaning in everyday language and a more specialized meaning in legal discourse. Therefore, students were trained to interpret terms in relation to genre, situation, intention, and evidential relevance.

4.2. Module 2: Language as Evidence

The second module introduced the central forensic linguistic concept of language as evidence. Students analyzed short anonymized materials and discussed how linguistic choices may become relevant in legal interpretation. They examined how lexical selection, modality, repetition, politeness strategies, punctuation, and pragmatic implication may indicate stance, pressure, threat, or intention.

This module was especially important because it helped students understand the difference between linguistic analysis and legal judgement. Students were not asked to decide whether a person was guilty or responsible. Instead, they were asked to identify linguistic features that could be relevant for interpretation.

4.3. Module 3: Threatening and Anonymous Communication

The third module focused on threatening and anonymous communication. The materials were based on real or realistically modelled examples provided by legal specialists and fully anonymized for classroom use. Students analyzed direct threats, indirect threats, conditional threats, ambiguous formulations, and implicit intimidation.

The linguistic focus included modal verbs, imperatives, conditional clauses, intensifiers, evaluative vocabulary, metaphors, and pragmatic implication. Students learned that threats are not always explicit. They may be expressed indirectly, through context, allusion, repetition, or emotionally loaded language.

4.4. Module 4: Authorship and Stylistic Patterns

The fourth module introduced students to basic authorship-oriented analysis. Students compared short text samples and observed recurring linguistic features, such as spelling habits, punctuation, sentence structure, preferred vocabulary, formulaic expressions, discourse markers, and stylistic repetition.

The aim was not to train forensic experts, but to develop awareness of non-random linguistic patterns. Students learned that authorship analysis requires comparison and caution. A single similarity cannot establish authorship; rather, evidential value may emerge from clusters of linguistic features.

4.5. Module 5: Institutional Discourse and Legal Communication

The fifth module focused on institutional discourse, including witness statements, interrogation-related language, complaints, explanations, and procedural communication. Students examined how institutional roles influence language use and how power relations may be reflected in question forms, response structures, and lexical choices.

This module was particularly useful for legal foreign language education because it connected terminology with institutional genres. Students practiced reading and interpreting legal and quasi-legal texts not only as language learners, but also as analysts of discourse.

4.6. Module 6: Digital Discourse, Cyber Communication, and Propaganda

The final module connected forensic linguistics with contemporary digital and security-related contexts. Students analyzed anonymous online comments, cyber aggression, manipulative discourse, and simplified propaganda narratives. The focus was on emotionally loaded language, polarization, dehumanisation, repetition, metaphor, and ideological framing.

This module also opened the military-educational perspective of forensic linguistics. In contemporary geopolitical conditions, language is a central instrument of influence, intimidation, information warfare, and hostile narrative construction. Therefore, students were encouraged to understand forensic linguistic competence as relevant not only to law, but also to cyber discourse analysis, threat identification, strategic communication, and propaganda decoding.

5. Observed Pedagogical Outcomes

Since the model was exploratory, the outcomes should be understood as pedagogical observations rather than statistically generalizable research findings. Nevertheless, the pilot experience revealed several important tendencies. First, the orientation questionnaire showed that students had a clear need for more practice-oriented legal foreign language instruction. They expected the courses to include realistic situations, case materials, and terminology used in context. This confirmed the relevance of integrating forensic linguistic elements into Legal English and Legal German.

Second, after three months of module-based instruction, students demonstrated improved ability to understand and explain legal terms covered during the course. Their progress was especially visible in tasks where they had to define terms in context rather than translate them mechanically. This suggests that case-based forensic linguistic modules can strengthen terminological competence.

Third, students became more aware of the evidential function of language. At the beginning of the semester, many students associated legal foreign language learning primarily with vocabulary acquisition. After the modules, they were better able to explain how linguistic choices may indicate threat, intention, authorship, pressure, or manipulation.

Fourth, students showed greater engagement when working with anonymized case materials. The fact that the materials were based on real or realistically grounded legal situations made the learning process more meaningful. At the same time, full anonymization ensured ethical classroom practice. This balance between authenticity and confidentiality was one of the strongest aspects of the model.

Fifth, the cooperation between linguists and law specialists proved essential. Legal specialists ensured the juridical relevance of the materials, while linguists transformed them into language-learning and analytical tasks. This interdisciplinary structure prevented two possible weaknesses: reducing legal foreign language education to vocabulary memorization and reducing forensic linguistics to abstract theory.

Sixth, the bilingual design of the model strengthened students' comparative awareness. By working in Legal English and Legal German, students saw that legal meanings and institutional genres may vary across languages, but forensic linguistic categories such as authorship, threat, evidence, intention, and discourse structure can be studied across linguistic contexts

6. Discussion

The pilot model demonstrates that forensic linguistics can be meaningfully integrated into legal foreign language education through a gradual and interdisciplinary approach. Instead of immediately introducing forensic linguistics as an independent course, universities may first test its relevance through modules embedded in Legal English and Legal German. This strategy is institutionally realistic and pedagogically productive.

The strongest feature of the model is the use of real or realistically based anonymized case materials provided by the Faculty of Law. Authenticity is crucial in specialized language education because students need to see how terminology functions in professional contexts. However, authenticity must be balanced with ethical responsibility. The full anonymization of materials ensured that no personal, institutional, or sensitive information was disclosed. This made it possible to preserve the analytical value of real legal discourse while protecting confidentiality.

The model also confirms the importance of interdisciplinarity. Forensic linguistics cannot be taught effectively from a purely linguistic or purely legal perspective. Legal specialists provide the juridical framework and case relevance; linguists provide tools for textual, pragmatic, stylistic, and discourse analysis. The cooperation between these two fields enables students to understand that the same material can be approached through different but complementary forms of expertise.

Another important aspect is the distinction between linguistic evidence and legal judgement. Students must learn that forensic linguistic analysis does not determine guilt, innocence, or legal responsibility. Rather, it identifies and interprets language patterns that may be relevant to legal reasoning. This distinction is central to responsible forensic linguistic education.

The pilot experience also has implications for military and security education. Contemporary security environments are shaped by digital communication, propaganda, anonymous threats, hostile narratives, cyber aggression, and information manipulation. Forensic linguistic competence can support the identification of threatening language, the analysis of propaganda discourse, and the interpretation of hostile communication. Therefore, forensic linguistics has relevance not only for legal education but also for broader institutional and military-educational contexts.

However, the model has limitations. Since the orientation questionnaire was diagnostic rather than statistically representative, the results cannot be generalized without further research. The follow-up assessment measured improvement only in relation to the materials covered during the three-month instructional period. Future studies should include more systematic pre-test and post-test instruments, larger groups, control groups, and more detailed quantitative analysis.

7. Implications for Curriculum Development

The pilot experience suggests that forensic linguistics can be introduced into university curricula gradually. The first stage may involve separate modules within existing Legal English and Legal German courses. The second stage may involve an elective course in forensic linguistics. The third stage may involve a broader interdisciplinary program connecting linguistics, law, translation studies, digital communication, and security studies.

A future independent course in forensic linguistics could include the following components:

- forensic linguistics and the concept of language as evidence;
- legal terminology and legal discourse;
- speech acts, threats, and pragmatic interpretation;
- anonymous communication and authorship attribution;
- interrogation, confession, and witness statements;
- legal translation and cross-linguistic legal interpretation;
- digital discourse and cyber aggression;
- propaganda analysis and hostile narratives;
- expert reporting and ethical standards;
- cooperation between linguists and legal professionals.

Such a curriculum would develop transferable analytical competencies. These competencies would be useful not only for students of linguistics and law, but also for students of translation, international relations, public administration, media analysis, military education, and security studies.

8. Conclusion

This paper has presented a pilot interdisciplinary and bilingual model for integrating forensic linguistics into legal foreign language education, specifically within Legal English and Legal German instruction. The model was based on an orientation questionnaire administered to 88 students, including 58 students of Legal English and 30 students of Legal German, followed by three months of module-based instruction and a follow-up assessment of students' terminology and analytical competence.

The model should not be understood as a full-scale empirical study, but as an exploratory pedagogical experience. Its value lies in demonstrating that forensic linguistic elements can be successfully integrated into existing legal foreign language courses. The use of real or realistically grounded anonymized case materials provided by the Faculty of Law was the central methodological strength of the model. It ensured authenticity, legal relevance, interdisciplinary cooperation, and ethical responsibility.

The pilot experience suggests that forensic linguistic modules can improve students' understanding of legal terminology, increase their motivation, and develop their awareness of language as evidence. It also shows that students benefit from analyzing legal language not only as vocabulary, but as discourse, evidence, institutional practice, and potential risk.

The paper concludes that the integration of forensic linguistic modules into Legal English and Legal German may serve as a sustainable transitional step toward establishing forensic linguistics as an independent interdisciplinary university course. In contemporary legal, digital, and geopolitical environments, such a course would respond to an urgent academic and social need: to prepare students capable of analyzing language not only as communication, but also as evidence, strategy, risk, and institutional action.

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