

Review: Pennisi, Giulia Adriana (2025). *English for legal studies*. Carocci

ROXANNE BARBARA DOERR

University of Brescia

Book review

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ABSTRACT

EN Giulia Pennisi's *English for Legal Studies* (2025) provides a clear state of the art of legal English by openly acknowledging that it requires specialized levels of expertise, consideration of interactions and sound working knowledge of differing contexts. This has represented a challenge for teachers and curriculum designers and led to traditional textbook structures that try to encompass the most immediate overall needs of teachers and students by focusing on the most standardized and general aspects and genres of legal English. The present textbook pushes against such an approach and adopts an innovative stance by purposefully inserting legal English into its diverse historical-geographical context and exploring the real communicative functions that are carried out by its unique lexico-grammatical forms. This enables teachers and learners to understand the effect that language has on the law and appreciate the ways in which linguistics can be used in legal academic research and practice.

Key words: LEGAL ENGLISH, ESP (ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES), COMMON LAW, PLAIN LANGUAGE MOVEMENT

ES *English for Legal Studies*, de Giulia Pennisi (2025), ofrece una panorámica clara del estado del arte del inglés jurídico al reconocer abiertamente que este requiere niveles especializados de competencia, una atención rigurosa a las interacciones comunicativas y un conocimiento sólido de los distintos contextos de uso. Esta complejidad ha supuesto un desafío para el profesorado y para el diseño curricular, y ha dado lugar a estructuras tradicionales de manuales que tratan de abarcar las necesidades más inmediatas y generales de docentes y estudiantes, mediante la focalización en los aspectos y géneros más estandarizados del inglés jurídico. El presente manual se aparta de dicho enfoque y adopta una postura innovadora al insertar deliberadamente el inglés jurídico en su diverso contexto histórico y geográfico, y al explorar las funciones comunicativas reales que desempeñan sus formas léxico-gramaticales específicas. Este planteamiento permite al profesorado y al estudiantado comprender el efecto que el lenguaje ejerce sobre el derecho y apreciar las formas en las que la lingüística puede aplicarse tanto en la investigación jurídica académica como en la práctica profesional.

Palabras clave: INGLÉS JURÍDICO, INGLÉS PARA FINES ESPECÍFICOS, COMMON LAW, MOVIMIENTO DEL LENGUAJE CLARO

IT Il volume *English for Legal Studies* di Giulia Pennisi (2025) presenta un chiaro stato dell'arte dell'inglese giuridico, partendo dal presupposto che richiede livelli specialistici di competenza, attenzione alle dinamiche interazionali e solida conoscenza operativa dei diversi contesti d'uso. Tale complessità ha finora rappresentato una sfida per docenti e progettisti curriculari e ha portato alla diffusione di strutture manualistiche tradizionali che cercano di rispondere ai bisogni più immediati di docenti e studenti concentrandosi sugli aspetti e sui generi più standardizzati e generali dell'inglese giuridico. Il presente manuale si discosta consapevolmente da questo approccio e adotta una prospettiva innovativa, inserendo l'inglese giuridico nei suoi molteplici contesti storico-geografici ed esplorando le reali funzioni comunicative svolte dalle sue peculiari forme lessico-grammaticali. Ciò consente a docenti e apprendenti di comprendere l'impatto che il linguaggio esercita sul diritto e di apprezzare le modalità attraverso cui la linguistica può essere impiegata nella ricerca e nella pratica accademica in ambito giuridico.

Parole chiave: INGLESE GIURIDICO, INGLESE PER SCOPI SPECIFICI, COMMON LAW, MOVIMENTO PER IL LINGUAGGIO CHIARO

English for Legal Studies (2025) is the latest publication of Carocci's ongoing series of books on English Linguistics for Academicians and Professionals (ELAP), edited by Laura Pinnavaia and Annalisa Zanola. The volume, in accordance with the book series' main objective, is addressed to students, scholars and professionals who intend to learn or teach fundamental notions and competences in legal English. The textbook starts by acknowledging that legal English is essentially multifaceted. This complexity stems from the diversity of registers and contexts in which it is used, since everyday interactions involve speakers with different levels of competence and needs. This leads to challenges when planning university courses, as they are increasingly expected to provide learners on differing levels of expertise with the necessary tools to communicate in contingent academic and professional situations. Such courses must work within significant time and space constraints while being as comprehensive as possible to enable students to cognitively and linguistically navigate very specific legal documents. The legal textbooks that are currently available generally attempt to respond to these overall requirements by presenting legal English in its most standardized and unified form, and therefore with no or very little reference to the surrounding context.

Giulia Pennisi's study contributes to the debate by adopting an unconventional approach that reflects the wording of the title "English for Legal Studies", rather than "Legal English" or "English for/in Law". The volume connects the complexity of legal English with that of the legal *forma mentis*. By doing so, the textbook is free to explore such complexity in various dimensions corresponding to the broad sections in which the volume is divided. All the volumes of this series on ELAP are structured in a similar manner, with possible adjustments or additions in the titles of the chapters and number of subsections, to make them homogenous and more user-friendly for students, professionals, teachers and academics. Accordingly, Pennisi's textbook presents an "Introduction", followed by Chapter 1 on "The framework" to provide an overview of the context, and Chapter 2 on "The critical thinking area" regarding the main areas and issues of interest for the specific English at hand. Chapter 3 focuses on "Analysis and examples" to translate and explain the study's observations through detailed texts and examples and is followed by a final "Conclusions" section to reflect on main findings, limitations and potential future research. Chapters 1, 2 and 3 all present a "Concluding remarks" subchapter to reiterate and consolidate the main points of the chapters for readers' convenience.

The "Introduction" of the volume starts from a reflection on the proper use of language in law and legal professional's consequent responsibility to communicate and behave so as to promote laymen's positive attitude towards the law. It then explains one of the main reasons for the complexity of legal English and driving the author's context-driven approach. The current legal language, and more precisely its unique terminology and style, has remained frozen in the form that was established at the beginning of the 19th century. It therefore contains multiple obscure elements that create a compound effect that only versed experts can decode and render understandable to non-experts. Since legal language has always mirrored the reality it governs, Giulia Pennisi sustains that the solution does not lie in attempting to simplify it, but rather in employing legal instruments to predict what could happen in the real world and align its language accordingly. Mastering legal English requires English native and non-native speakers alike to have a good working knowledge of English applied to legal cases and legal contexts, coupled with awareness of its lexico-grammatical features and their communicative functions and goals. Teachers and curriculum designers of legal English courses must therefore unite law and linguistics, cognitively difficult as this may be, in order to ultimately train academics and practitioners in applying and expressing legal thinking in practice.

After this thoughtful "Introduction", the textbook continues with the diachronic-oriented "The framework" section outlining the parallel historic development of legal reasoning and legal English. Starting from reference to the attempted Plain Language Movement of 1979, Chapter 1 embarks on a detailed *excursus* into the two main phases (from the 5th century to 1050, and from 1050 to the 1900s) and three related subphases for each phase of the development of legal English. This division is based on key contacts between different cultures and languages and is fundamental in explaining the persistent presence of Anglo-Saxon Latin, and French and resulting binomials in legal English. The chapter then focuses on the sources of legal English, i.e. customary law, common law and statutory law, equity and delegated legislation and the rule of law, in terms of the evolution, function and role in the current juridical system. The connection between the law and its English is further strengthened by the adoption of English as a *lingua franca*, and later as the language of international political and legal institutions and commerce. The author then extends her analysis to international perspectives and legal systems by locating and describing five types of law (common law, civil law, customary law, religious law, mixed law system, international law) to provide an overview of the state of legal English in the countries and legal systems in which it is still in force. The chapter also describes the parallel development of research on English language in specific, represented by the discipline of LSP (Language for

Specific Purposes), and how it has detected and investigated the main complicating lexico-grammatical features of legal English and their sources. These features have shaped the style of legal English and are still influenced in turn by professional forms and conservatism, so the addressees of the textbook can understand how legal practice frames and is framed by its disciplinary discourse.

In the aptly named “The critical thinking area: English-speaking jurisdictions” section represented by Chapter 2, the study shifts to the synchronic analysis of English-speaking jurisdictions, and especially those in place in the United Kingdom and United States. By doing so, learners and practitioners learn more about the underlying diversity in geographic and social context that explain the possible complications that may arise upon understanding and using legal English across multiple nations. More specifically, the chapter presents the main authorities, divisions of legislative, executive and judicial powers, and names and functions of the main professional figures in the UK and US. This is clearly carried out with the textbook’s audience in mind, and therefore without assuming any previous knowledge or experience on its part. Therefore, the study provides clear definitions and distinctions and openly addresses cases of often (mis)used terms related to overlapping professional figures, processes and exceptional situations.

Chapter 3, which deals with “Analysis and Examples: legal texts”, represents the “practical section” of the textbook, with a focus on legal English’s most distinctive and puzzling linguistic and discursive features. Scholars and practitioners can now consolidate the knowledge of the previous chapters and verify how this is translated into real contexts and documents. The many guided examples that are provided here are of the utmost importance in view of understanding and using similar forms in the future across various legal genres so that they may be mastered through extensive direct experience and practice. Since the textbook’s audience is composed of readers who may not be acquainted with English language studies, the first part of the chapter is on “Legal genre(s) and register(s)” and provides definitions of fundamental concepts such as Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), genre and register to enable learners, teachers and readers from the legal field to become aware of their presence and influence in their line of study and work. Moreover, the decision to start from genres and registers sets the stage from a broader perspective by providing information on the text’s overall structure and purpose. The analysis then narrows its focus to legal text types, using Durant and Leung’s (2006) three main types of legal text, i.e. legislative, private law and procedural, as a reference. Legal text types are determined by their communicative function and mirror the rules and conventions of the legal systems in which they are implemented. The study takes the multitude and complexity of legal text types into account and offers students and professionals in law and/or LSP a “legal text categorisation” framework adapted from Soriano Barabino (2020). The framework is divided into specific steps and accompanied by an illustrative table that associates Soriano Barabino’s seven broad categories with detailed information on their text producers and genre/language. The author then applies this approach to last wills and employment contracts to demonstrate how it can assist in the analysis of legal texts.

The second part of Chapter 3 shifts its attention to “Vocabulary in context(s)” and therefore the lexico-grammatical features and breaks them into vocabulary in context(s) and grammar. Although legal vocabulary is characterized by highly specialized and/or technical meaning, the need for the provisions in which they are used to be inclusive, precise and clear resulted in the undeniable complexity of legal language. This paradox is further demonstrated with a list of consolidated linguistic habits and formulas and examples that are well-known to those studying and practicing law and its language. The use of borrowings and loanwords is dealt with separately for two reasons: it is connected to the development of the legal system and its underlying legal reasoning, and it often explains the presence of foreign words, archaic expressions and words deriving from non-legal semantic fields. The grammar of legal English reflects and expresses the law’s adversarial nature through long sentence structure and multiple main and subordinate clauses. The study therefore focuses on the most characterizing syntactic and morphological aspects and provides clear definitions in consideration of the addressees’ level of knowledge. More specifically, it starts from basic sentence structure and types of clauses and then deals with verb tenses and forms as “strategic markers” of structure and purpose. These deeper levels of language also feature and are shaped by archaic forms that, while cumbersome, continue to be used due to the specific legal functions that they perform. Such uses of language are passed on to legal practitioners as they gain experience. The textbook stands out because it not only accompanies these explanations with detailed examples and analyses, but it also highlights the underlying logical-interpretative reasons and the implicit legal and communicative effects that are often only intuited by students and practitioners. The chapter concludes by pointing out that law and language students dealing with legal English must not limit themselves to passively acquiring these formulas. Rather, they are encouraged to expand their

training and language-communication skills by understanding the linguistic semantic values and social pragmatic settings in and through which their professional language is employed.

The final “Conclusions” of the volume outlines the author’s reflections and suggestions on possible directions for future research, teaching and materials in the field of legal English. It reiterates the need for teachers, learners and practitioners to approach different levels of specialized expertise, consider a greater variety of interactions, and build a sound working knowledge of differing contexts. This requires the practitioner’s focus to move from language to law, and not the contrary, as in more traditional textbooks on legal English. Doing so enables the learner to glean the law’s use and reasoning from the texts they encounter by using language as an essential starting tool, and not a mere filter, to navigate the surrounding environment. Giulia Pennisi’s study concludes by highlighting three main takeaways for its readers. The first openly admits issues connected to the complexity of legal English and the increasingly demanding linguistic needs of law schools and legal practices. Although the Plain Language Movement has responded to this challenge by simplifying the language of the law through Justice Michael Kirby’s (2009) “ten commandments for plain language in law” and managed to extend the context to non-experts, this is still not enough. The second point is that legal texts are an “expression of agreement” and therefore convey an individual choice or decision of body, while legal language is a means of producing legal effects. The third and final point is that lexicogrammatical features and communicative functions and goals must be integrated in the legal scholar and practitioner’s learning and training to better align the spirit underlying legal reasoning with its form.

The volume completes ongoing research in the field by drawing on extensive literature on law and language to probe and reveal knowledge gaps resulting from other textbooks’ excessively general or specific focus. A further strong point of the textbook is that it supports English language teachers and self-taught learners who may not be acquainted with legal terminology with useful references and materials. The latter consist in a clear glossary of legal terms and a bibliography of suggested readings, dictionaries and glossaries and websites. These allow readers of different linguistic and disciplinary backgrounds to become acquainted with the study’s main concepts and with other reliable sources should they decide to further pursue their learning and development.

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Roxanne Barbara Doerr, University of Brescia
 roxanne.doerr@unibs.it

- EN** | **Roxanne Barbara Doerr** (PhD) is a researcher in English Language and Translation at the Department of Economics and Management of the University of Brescia (Italy). Her research areas include English for Specific and Academic Purposes, stylistics in academic language, military discourse, military language teaching and learning, online discourse communities, Corpus Assisted Discourse Studies and Corpus Stylistics. Her most recent publications include the book *Academic Style Proofreading: an Introduction* (Peter Lang Group AG, 2023) and essays on the above-mentioned research areas in national and international peer-reviewed journals and volumes. She is winner of the COMET 2023 Researcher Award for the paper “(Un)certainty and risk communication on Covid-19 vaccines: a comparison between civilian and military discourse”. She also translates, revises and proofreads academic papers and volume chapters for publication in various fields.
- ES** | **Roxanne Barbara Doerr** (PhD) es investigadora en lengua inglesa y traducción en el Departamento de Economía y Gestión de la Universidad de Brescia (Italia). Sus áreas de investigación incluyen el inglés para fines específicos y académicos, la estilística del lenguaje académico, el discurso militar, la enseñanza y el aprendizaje del lenguaje militar, las comunidades discursivas en línea, los estudios del discurso asistidos por corpus y la estilística de corpus. Entre sus publicaciones más recientes se incluye el libro *Academic Style Proofreading: an Introduction* (Peter Lang Group AG, 2023), así como diversos artículos y capítulos en revistas y volúmenes nacionales e Internacionales sobre las áreas mencionadas. Ha sido galardonada con el COMET 2023 Researcher Award por el trabajo titulado “(Un)certainty and risk communication on Covid-19 vaccines: a comparison between civilian and military discourse”. Asimismo, realiza labores de traducción, revisión y corrección de estilo de artículos académicos y capítulos de libro para su publicación en diversas disciplinas.
- IT** | **Roxanne Barbara Doerr (PhD)** è ricercatrice in Lingua e Traduzione Inglese presso il Dipartimento di Economia e Management dell'Università degli Studi di Brescia. Le sue aree di ricerca includono l'Inglese per Scopi Specifici e Accademici, la stilistica nella scrittura accademica, il discorso militare, l'insegnamento e l'apprendimento della lingua in ambito militare, le comunità discorsive online, e le metodologie del Corpus Assisted Discourse Studies e Corpus Stylistics. Le sue pubblicazioni più recenti comprendono la monografia *Academic Style Proofreading: an Introduction* (Peter Lang Group AG, 2023) e contributi dedicati alle aree di ricerca sopra menzionate pubblicati in riviste e volumi nazionali e internazionali. È vincitrice del COMET 2023 Researcher Award per l'articolo “(Un)certainty and risk communication on Covid-19 vaccines: a comparison between civilian and military discourse”. Si occupa inoltre di traduzione, revisione e proofreading di articoli accademici e capitoli di volume destinati alla pubblicazione in vari ambiti disciplinari.