Ruth Breeze*

University of Navarra, Spain
rbreeze@unav.es

TEACHING THE VOCABULARY OF LEGAL DOCUMENTS: A CORPUS-DRIVEN APPROACH

Abstract

The globalization of business activity has been accompanied by an unprecedented need for lawyers to communicate internationally. One major aspect of their work centres on legal documents: lawyers have to draft and understand contracts and other essential documents, which are not only syntactically complex, but also contain highly technical vocabulary which may prove extremely challenging for non-native speakers. Even though non-native lawyers generally find the principles and concepts comprehensible, the lexis itself remains a considerable problem, unless specialized help is provided in the form of specific legal English instruction. This article describes a systematic approach to identifying the essential vocabulary of legal documents in English using WordSmith to find the most frequent words and word clusters (collocations and set phrases) in a 400,000 word corpus of authentic legal documents (DOCLEGAL), and then identify common verbs and prepositional phrases. The vocabulary of ten sub-corpora consisting of different document genres is then contrasted with that of the whole corpus, in order to identify keywords, keyword links and common clusters for these specific genres. The information from the corpus is then used to create exercises which help to familiarize students with these specialized words and expressions.

* Corresponding address: Ruth Breeze, Instituto de Idiomas/Instituto Cultura y Sociedad, Universidad de Navarra, C/Irunlarrea s/n, 31009 Pamplona, Spain.

44