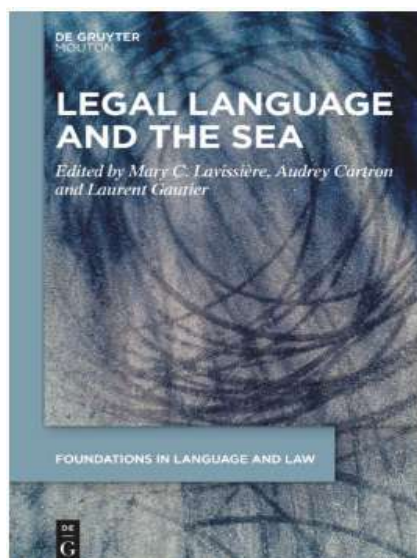


BOOK REVIEW



CHARTING MARITIME DISCOURSE

Mary C. Lavissière, Audrey Cartron and Laurent Gautier (Eds.). LEGAL LANGUAGE AND THE SEA (2025), de Gruyter Mouton. 240 pp., ISBN 978-3-11133-243-7 (HBK); 978-3-11133-254-3 (EPUB).
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Human relationship with the sea and ocean is a very intricate one. Throughout history, water has served as “a meeting place for cultures” (p. 3), fostering interaction and exchange. Consequently, the evolution of (maritime) language reflects a long history of intercultural and linguistic exchange. As Čulić-Viskota and Kalebota (2013, p. 109) aptly observe, “Maritime English is said to be a product of life on the ocean itself.” Such a language is characterized by distinctive discourse features and displays considerable variation across registers and genres. The “basic ‘language of the sea’ stems from the need for naming objects, phenomena and human relationships experienced in the events that take place on or in relation to the water and the sea” (Paine, 2013, p. 4). The sea is where cultures meet, but also clash. Therefore, there is a strong need for legal regulation, which is achieved through maritime law and the law of the sea.

Extensive literature exists on maritime law and the law of the sea. However, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the *language* through which these laws are written, interpreted, and contested, which is a curious oversight, given that, as the editors note, the wording of a convention can shape the law itself and sometimes lead to quite unintended consequences. Considering the large and diversified maritime community (Franceschi, 2014, p. 79), one should speak of “Maritime Englishes” rather than a single, uniform variety (Pritchard et al., 2024).

The book *Legal language and the sea*, edited by Mary C. Lavissière, Audrey Cartron and Laurent Gautier, fills the existing gap in connecting maritime law, law of the sea and linguistics. In a world where environmental, humanitarian, and

political crises frequently play out on the seas, the editors argue convincingly that we cannot afford to ignore the language through which maritime law and the law of the sea are articulated. The volume brings together legal scholars and linguists in a genuinely interdisciplinary dialogue. It ranges from macro-level analyses, from discourse and genre studies of legal texts, to micro-level concerns such as terminology and translation.

The book consists of seven chapters, preceded by an introduction written by Mary C. Lavissière and Charles de Corbière. In this introductory chapter titled "Towards an integration of law and linguistics into the blue humanities" the authors set the tone by making a call to integrate linguistics, maritime law and law of the sea into the "blue humanities or coastal studies." This area of study has been defined by Mentz (2023, p. 17) as "a current of scholarly and artistic discourses that foreground human relationships with water in all its forms."

In Chapter 1, titled "Understanding and researching legal genres and language within the maritime domain," Ana Bocanegra-Valle explores how language is used in legal and professional contexts connected to the sea. The chapter outlines the main branches of maritime law and the law of the sea and discusses notions such as maritime English, maritime legal language, and genre networks within the maritime legal domain. By analysing a typology of directive utterances in two key international treaties such as the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL), the chapter highlights how linguistic analysis can reveal the complexity of (legal) language and the sea. Moreover, by foregrounding this underexplored area, the chapter sets an agenda for future linguistic research into maritime language and genres.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 focus on legal language and the complex and evolving relationship between humankind and the oceans, but also the role that language plays, thus bringing together law of the sea and linguistics. While legal discourse on the sea has ancient roots, the contributions of this part of the book stress the urgent need to understand how law responds to contemporary challenges such as marine pollution, biodiversity loss, maritime trade disruptions, migration crises, and the broader ecological and geopolitical issues tied to the oceans. Three chapters demonstrate how linguistic analysis of legal terminology offers valuable insights into these debates.

In Chapter 2, titled "The conceptualization of a legal status for marine environment through the evolution of terminology," Emma Lelong adopts a diachronic perspective and traces the evolving terminology around the marine environment. The author illustrates how language shapes legal recognition and protection tracing the evolution of marine protected species in international law, from post-war representations of the sea as a resource, to the 1970s notions of fragile ecosystems, and finally to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) declaration of the seabed as the "common heritage of mankind" (p. 51). Lelong's analysis convincingly shows how changes in legal terminology

reflect deeper shifts in humanity's relationship with the marine environment, including emergent notions of intrinsic value and even legal personhood for natural entities.

In Chapter 3, titled "Liability for environmental crimes: A comparative study of laws on ecocide and the prevention of oil discharge into the sea," Arthur Joyeux compares national approaches to liability for environmental crimes, focusing on ecocide and oil discharge prevention. The contested history of the term ecocide in international, European, and French law has been linked both to wartime and peacetime environmental destruction, calling on *jus in bello*. Joyeux highlights the challenges of integrating ecocide into existing criminal law systems, particularly the requirement of intent in French law, which complicates the prosecution of large-scale environmental damage such as oil spills. The author's discussion underscores both the legal obstacles and the political urgency of recognizing severe environmental harm.

In Chapter 4 titled "Law of the sea, maritime law, and human rights applied to migration: Towards a common language?" Cassandre Genonceau tackles the fraught intersection of migration, human rights, and maritime/legal terminology, asking whether a common language is possible. The author addresses the fragmented and inadequate legal protection for migrants at sea. Surveying multiple sources including the law of the sea, maritime conventions such as the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR), international criminal law, human rights law, and refugee law, Genonceau demonstrates how inconsistent terminology and state-centred frameworks leave migrants in a precarious legal position. The author's call for reforms grounded in "elementary considerations of humanity" (p. 130) and closer integration of human rights principles into the law of the sea points to a pressing need for conceptual and terminological renewal.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 illustrate how the intersection of law and linguistics, and maritime studies can shed light on some of the most urgent challenges that the global society is facing. By showing how legal language both reflects and shapes humanity's engagement with the sea, they open the door to richer interdisciplinary dialogue in what the editors call the "blue humanities."

In the last three chapters the focus is shifted from law of the sea to maritime law and maritime legal texts. In Chapter 5 titled "Global vessel sharing agreements versus joint ventures: How do contractual provisions legally entitle contestable legal personality of shipping alliances?" Laurent Fedi explores contractual language in vessel-sharing agreements and joint ventures, probing how legal wording can (or cannot) create contestable (i.e., dubious, questionable) legal personalities. For that purpose, the author compares maritime alliance contracts with joint venture agreements, concentrating on how they navigate competition law despite benefiting from multiple exemptions. Using a corpus of ten contracts, the author shows that the line between the two genres is tenuous arguing that maritime agreements may in practice function as *de facto* joint ventures. This legal-genre perspective

demonstrates how comparative textual analysis can reveal both overt and covert functional similarities across contract types.

In Chapter 6, titled “Rhetorical analysis of agreement authority article in maritime agreements,” Mary C. Lavissière offers a rhetorical analysis of agreement authority articles in maritime contracts by examining the *Overview of Agreement Authority* article found in U.S.-filed maritime contracts. Using rhetorical function analysis on a corpus of 61 documents, the author highlights how these clauses not only regulate collaboration between signatories but also perform an external-facing role, particularly in relation to the Federal Maritime Commission. The study emphasizes that maritime contracts must be read not only as internal instruments but as texts addressing multiple audiences.

In Chapter 7, titled “To what extent is the translation equivalent: An exploration of terminological variation in English-Chinese translations of maritime law,” Wang Haiping and Huang Zihao investigate terminological variation in a translation of a major maritime law textbook from English into Mandarin Chinese. While not aiming to contribute to theoretical translation theory, the chapter focuses on applied translation, making use of comparative law frameworks to tackle terminological challenges. The detailed examination of problematic terms underscores the difficulty of rendering highly specialized maritime legal language across both linguistic and legal systems, especially very distant ones. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 illustrate the diversity of approaches to maritime law as a discourse domain, demonstrating how contract language, rhetorical functions, and translation practices all shape the ways in which the shipping industry is regulated and understood.

This collection is not just descriptive but evaluative, because it probes how legal language both reflects and shapes maritime realities (Chapters 3 and 4). Particularly compelling are the chapters on environmental protection and migration, which illustrate how terminological and discursive choices carry real-world consequences. The multilingual perspective is another strength, resisting the easy assumption that English alone dominates maritime law. In this reviewer’s opinion, the main strength of this title is its interdisciplinarity, as there are not many publications in the field that attempt to bridge so many domains. At the same time, this poses a shortcoming, as the book becomes difficult to navigate and understand if readers are not somehow familiar with the discipline. Nevertheless, this volume represents an important first step in positioning maritime legal language or “maritime legalese” (following Bocanegra-Valle in Chapter 1) as a distinct area of interdisciplinary inquiry.

Overall, *Legal language and the sea* fills an evident scholarly gap. It is not a handbook of maritime law, nor a law of the sea, nor legal linguistics, nor maritime English. Rather, it is a reflective, critical examination of how law and language interact in maritime and ocean contexts; an interaction that is too often overlooked, despite its profound implications and ever existing connection of mankind with the sea. This book will be of clear interest to legal experts, legal linguists, maritime

lawyers, maritime English researchers, maritime English educators and instructors, translators, and anyone engaged in the study of how global challenges are mediated through language and law.

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