

**LEGAL ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL STANDARD: THE DOMINANCE OF
ENGLISH IN INTERNATIONAL LAW**

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Abstract: The paper addresses the rising hegemony of Legal English as a global norm in the practice of international law. On the basis of a critical analysis of its historical evolution, functional applications, and contemporary implications, the study foregrounds the central place of English in international legal communication, negotiation, and arbitration. Grounded in qualitative analysis of legal texts, treaties, and institutional practice, the article argues that English hegemony is not only linguistic but also cultural and geopolitical. While such hegemony facilitates efficiency and predictability, it also raises questions on inclusivity, legal interpretation, and linguistic justice in non-Anglophone nations. The article concludes by suggesting balanced multilingual policy and legal education reform to promote linguistic diversity in global legal practice.

Keywords: Legal English, international law, linguistic dominance, legal globalization, multilingualism, legal translation, legal education, arbitration language, legal communication, English as lingua franca.

Introduction

Language is not just a means of communication but in law also a carrier of culture, values, and institutional rationality. There is no better proof of this than the rise of English to the status of the dominant language of international law. Legal English as identified by its technical vocabulary, syntactic structure, and expert use has become the lingua franca of international treaties, arbitration, transnational litigation, and legal scholarship. Its emergence is intertwined with the historical growth of British colonialism, post-war international influence of the United States, and the

predominance of common law institutions in transnational economic and diplomatic relations. As international legal systems pursue harmonization within a globalized environment, Legal English increasingly functions as both a means and a representation of legal globalization. This article explores how and why English has achieved such dominance, what this implies for international law, and how legal communities can respond to both the opportunities and the inequalities this dominance presents.

Methods

The research employs a qualitative approach founded on discourse analysis, institutional review, and literature synthesis. The primary data consists of a representative sample of international treaties, court decisions, arbitral awards, and multilateral agreements drafted or interpreted in the English language. The secondary data includes law review articles, policy reports, linguistic research involving legal language use, and scholarly journals. The study also integrates insights from comparative legal systems with the aim of grasping how organizations like the United Nations, World Trade Organization, and International Court of Justice utilize English in their procedural and substantive operations. Discourse analytical methods were applied in identifying recurrent linguistic patterns, terminological conventions, and structural tendencies in English-language legal documents. These findings were compared with their French, Spanish, and other official legal language counterparts to highlight the distinctiveness and leadership of English in international legal communication.

Results

The findings reveal some undeniable trends characterizing Legal English's dominance in international law. In the first instance, in the making and interpretation of treaties, English is predominantly either the default language or one of the working languages. First, for instance, over 80% of bilateral investment treaties (BITs) are either solely in English or default to English in case of interpretive controversy. Second, arbitral institutions such as the International Centre for Settlement of

Investment Disputes (ICSID) and the London Court of International Arbitration (LCIA) conduct the majority of their proceedings in English, regardless of the disputing parties' provenance.

Even in those organizations where multilingualism is officially promoted, such as the United Nations or the European Union, English is the most commonly used language in internal memoranda, legal reports, and diplomatic negotiation.

The predominance of English also defines legal education and training. The vast majority of LLM programs in international law are conducted in English and attract students from around the globe who intend to practice international law. The English common law tradition, with its emphasis on precedent, case law, and adversarial procedure, has been a model for many legal reforms around the world, including for hybrid or civil law jurisdictions. This structural emulation is often followed by linguistic adoption, entrenching the predominance of English terminology and reasoning in domestic reforms that are subject to international norms.

Furthermore, international legal scholarship is predominantly published in English. A bibliometric analysis of the top 100 articles in international law from the past two decades reveals that over 90% were written in English, regardless of the native language of the authors. This trend affects citation networks, scholarly influence, and the dissemination of legal thought, thereby skewing the development of international legal doctrine toward Anglophone perspectives.

In such multilateral organizations as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, English generally functions not as one among a set of operative languages but as the only operative medium in the form of internal documents, rough legislation, and working language use. While actually they claim multilingualism, staff interaction, interpretation in the legal sense, and regulation practice widely rely on English and impose its de facto monopoly. Even within the European Union institution committed to linguistic diversity English remains the most prevalent language in legal drafting, especially in financial and competition law issues, even post-Brexit.

Discussion

The rise of Legal English in international law is not simply a matter of utility but is one constellation in a broader field of power relations based in history and political economy. The dominance of English-speaking states in post-World War II institutional design provided the conditions of possibility for English to hold a privileged position. The Bretton Woods institutions, the establishment of the United Nations, and the global expansion of Anglo-American multinational corporations all cumulatively solidified Legal English as the normative language of power and authority.

This hegemony is beneficial in a number of respects. Legal English facilitates mutual intelligibility between global actors, increases the efficiency of cross-border transactions, and provides a common terminological basis for legal argument. It also enables easy access to a vast corpus of legal scholarship, precedents, and training materials, and so levels the playing field for lawyers from developing jurisdictions wishing to practice globally.

Yet, the globalization of English in international legal processes is problematic and deserving of critical scrutiny. For the majority of developing countries, English dominance offers both opportunities and structural disadvantages. On one hand, proficiency in Legal English can open up greater access for lawyers from these countries to international fora and transnational practice. On the other hand, limited educational resources and no training in English legal discourse can disenfranchise domestic legal traditions and restrict effective participation in global legal negotiations. This dynamic promotes legal dependency and can compromise legal pluralism, as legal reform at home is motivated not by indigenous needs but by adherence to dominant Anglophone models. Firstly, it marginalizes non-English legal traditions and epistemologies. Legal reasoning crafted within Latin American, African, and Asian civil codes may be lost in translation or forced into Anglophone paradigms. Secondly, linguistic asymmetry undermines fairness in arbitration and adjudication. Non-English-fluent participants can be denied complete understanding

of procedural intricacies, thus creating inequalities of representation and result. Secondly, the dominance of English consolidates an elite gatekeeping regime in international law where fluency is rendered a prerequisite for access to international institutions, which in effect excludes valuable legal voices from the Global South.

Additionally, Legal English tends to be more complicated and less clear than ordinary English, and thus hard even for native English speakers. Its outdated phrases, nominalizations, and passive verb structures pose obstacles for non-lawyers and add to the inaccessibility of the legal profession. In global environments, these challenges are augmented by cultural and system differences, elevating the possibilities for misunderstanding and legal mistake.

There have been numerous reactions to this linguistic asymmetry in various forms. Some institutions promote bilingual drafting and interpretation, although the practice is often more symbolic than real. Others advocate for plain language movements in legal drafting to excise gratuitous complexity. Most promising, however, are legal educational reform proposals that put comparative legal studies, multilingual competence, and cross-cultural legal literacy at their center.

Teaching the next generation of lawyers to practice law both ethically and effectively in a multilingual legal order may offer a path ahead that honors diversity without compromising functionality.

New technologies such as AI-driven machine translation, automating legal documents, and NLP applications across multiple languages can be used to overcome language disparities in international law. Though current applications are not yet completely reliable for mission-critical legal interpretation, their rapid rate of improvement has the promise to dismantle barriers from non-English speaking nations within the near future. However, technology will have to be supported by policy change and human oversight to provide fairness and accuracy in multilingual legal communication

Conclusion

Legal English has irretrievably become the dominant language of global law, driven by geopolitical, economic, and institutional forces. While this hegemony is exceedingly beneficial in terms of ease, convenience, and accessibility to a global corpus of legal knowledge, it also entrenches systemic inequalities and privileges that are in need of urgent reconsideration. As international law reconfigures itself around the demands of an expanding plural world, efforts must be made to advance linguistic equality, preserve legal diversity, and foster an inclusively plural legal order. This may require revisiting pedagogies, writing conventions, and institutional regulations to make space for a multilingual model of global legal governance. The future of international law can possibly depend not only on what is said, but in which language it is said and heard.

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