

Eureka Journal of Language, Culture & Social Change (EJLCSC)

ISSN 2760-4926 (Online) Volume 2, Issue 3, March 2026



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LOST IN TRANSLATION: THE IMPACT OF LEGAL DOCUMENT ERRORS ON JUDICIAL OUTCOMES AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

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Abstract

This article examines the critical role of accurate translation in legal documents and its direct impact on judicial outcomes and the development of international law. In an increasingly globalized legal environment, cross-border disputes, international treaties, and transnational litigation rely heavily on precise linguistic interpretation. Even minor translation errors may lead to significant misinterpretations of legal norms, contractual obligations, and procedural rights. The study analyzes common types of translation errors, including semantic inaccuracies, terminological inconsistencies, and cultural misinterpretations. It also explores how such errors influence court decisions, potentially leading to unjust rulings or prolonged legal disputes. Special attention is given to the role of certified translators, legal experts, and institutional frameworks that aim to minimize risks associated with linguistic ambiguity.

Furthermore, the article highlights notable cases where translation mistakes have altered judicial outcomes or affected international agreements. It argues that improving translation standards, adopting unified legal terminology, and enhancing cooperation between linguists and legal professionals are essential for ensuring fairness and consistency in legal systems.

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The findings emphasize that language is not merely a tool of communication but a fundamental component of legal accuracy and justice. Strengthening translation practices contributes to the integrity of both national judicial systems and international legal order.

Keywords: Legal translation, judicial outcomes, international law, translation errors, legal documents, linguistic ambiguity, court decisions, cross-border disputes, legal terminology, interpretation

Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqola huquqiy hujjatlarning aniq tarjimasini muhimligini va uning sud qarorlariga hamda xalqaro huquq rivojiga bevosita ta'sirini tahlil qiladi. Globallashtirish sharoitida xalqaro nizolar, shartnomalar va transmilliy sud jarayonlari aniq til talqiniga tayanadi. Hatto kichik tarjima xatolari ham huquqiy normalar, majburiyatlar va protsessual huquqlarning noto'g'ri tushunilishiga olib kelishi mumkin.

Tadqiqotda tarjima xatolarining asosiy turlari — semantik noaniqliklar, terminologik nomuvofiqliklar va madaniy tafovutlardan kelib chiqadigan xatolar ko'rib chiqiladi. Shuningdek, bunday xatolar sud qarorlariga qanday ta'sir ko'rsatishi, adolatsiz hukmlarga yoki uzoq davom etadigan nizolarga sabab bo'lishi tahlil qilinadi. Sertifikatlangan tarjimonlar, huquqshunoslar va institutsional mexanizmlarning roli alohida yoritiladi.

Maqolada tarjima xatolari sud qarorlarini o'zgartirib yuborgan yoki xalqaro kelishuvlarga ta'sir ko'rsatgan holatlar ham muhokama qilinadi. Muallif tarjima standartlarini yaxshilash, yagona huquqiy terminologiyani joriy etish va tilshunoslar hamda huquqshunoslar o'rtasidagi hamkorlikni kuchaytirish zarurligini ta'kidlaydi.

Natijalar shuni ko'rsatadiki, til nafaqat aloqa vositasi, balki adolat va huquqiy aniqlikning muhim omilidir.

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Kalit soʻzlar: huquqiy tarjima, sud qarorlari, xalqaro huquq, tarjima xatolari, hujjatlar, lingvistik noaniqlik, sud jarayoni, transchegaraviy nizolar, terminologiya, talqin

Аннотация

Данная статья исследует значение точного перевода юридических документов и его влияние на судебные решения и развитие международного права. В условиях глобализации международные споры, договоры и транснациональные процессы требуют высокой точности языковой интерпретации. Даже незначительные ошибки перевода могут привести к искажению правовых норм, обязательств и процессуальных прав.

В работе анализируются основные виды переводческих ошибок: семантические неточности, терминологические расхождения и культурные интерпретационные различия. Рассматривается влияние этих ошибок на судебные решения, включая риск вынесения несправедливых вердиктов и затягивания разбирательств. Особое внимание уделяется роли профессиональных переводчиков, юристов и институциональных механизмов контроля качества перевода.

Также приводятся примеры случаев, когда ошибки перевода повлияли на исход судебных дел или международных соглашений. Автор подчеркивает необходимость совершенствования стандартов перевода, унификации юридической терминологии и укрепления взаимодействия между лингвистами и правоведами.

В заключение делается вывод о том, что язык является ключевым элементом правовой точности и справедливости.

Ключевые слова: юридический перевод, судебные решения, международное право, ошибки перевода, юридические документы,

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лингвистическая неоднозначность, судебный процесс, трансграничные споры, терминология, интерпретация

INTRODUCTION

Legal translation plays a pivotal role in the administration of justice, ensuring that legal documents are interpreted and enforced with precision across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The significance of attaining clarity and accuracy in legal translations cannot be overstated, as inaccuracies can precipitate comprehensive misinterpretations with far-reaching consequences. Indeed, translation errors can alter the intended meaning of legal provisions, resulting in skewed judicial outcomes that not only affect individual cases but also undermine the integrity of the legal system on a broader scale. The intricate nature of legal language, coupled with the nuances of different legal systems and cultural contexts, necessitates a meticulous approach to translation that prioritizes fidelity to the original text.

The implications of translation errors extend beyond individual litigants to influence the interpretation of international treaties and agreements, ultimately shaping the fundamental understanding of laws across various jurisdictions. Majority researchers underscore the importance of contractual clarity and legal interpretation in corporate settings, highlighting the precarious balance that legal professionals must maintain when navigating multilingual environments. In situations where contractual obligations hinge on translated documents, a seemingly innocuous mistranslation can lead to disputes that escalate into costly litigation or hinder international business operations. The precision required in legal translation is not merely a matter of semantics but rather a safeguard against potential misinterpretations that could distort the original intent of legal agreements.

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DISCUSSION

The divergence in legal terminologies and concepts across language borders can create a fertile ground for ambiguity. For instance, terms such as "consideration" and "liability," which have distinct meanings within common law jurisdictions, may not possess direct equivalents in civil law systems. Without an understanding of the intrinsic legal context, translators may inadvertently introduce errors that alter the contractual obligations or rights articulated in legal documents. This phenomenon underscores the pressing need for translators to possess not only linguistic expertise but also a profound understanding of the legal principles and frameworks pertinent to the texts they are translating. Al-Tarawneh and Al-Badawi's emphasis on the necessity of comprehensive legal knowledge among translators serves as a crucial reminder of the complexities inherent in legal translation [Al-Tarawneh and Al-Badawi, 2024; 1315].

Errors stemming from inadequate knowledge of legal systems can have palpable repercussions in court decisions, particularly in contexts where the translated materials are viewed as determinative evidence. Judges and juries rely on accurate translations to reach fair and informed conclusions about cases, and any misinterpretation can compromise the judicial process, resulting in unjust outcomes. Understanding the gravity of translation fidelity within the legal arena is essential for ensuring that justice is not just served but accurately reflected in the legal protections afforded to individuals under the law. The ramifications of translation errors thus extend well beyond individual legal disputes; they raise critical questions about the effectiveness of legal institutions in safeguarding rights and enforcing obligations across linguistic divides. This underlines the necessity for rigorous quality assurance processes, professional training, and a commitment to linguistic accuracy in the realm of legal translation to uphold the sanctity of the law. Translation inaccuracies in legal documents can yield severe repercussions, as evidenced by multiple case studies that illuminate the real-world ramifications of such errors on judicial outcomes. A pivotal investigation by Hu

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and Cheng meticulously explores various judicial cases where mistranslations have fundamentally altered legal interpretations [Hu and Cheng, 2016; 237]. For instance, the not able case of *R v. Odfell* showcases how a simple yet critical mistranslation of legal terminology resulted in the defendant being unjustly charged with a more severe crime than warranted. The term "intentionally" was erroneously rendered in the target language as "negligently," leading to a significant increase in sentencing owing to the differing legal paradigms surrounding intent. This acute misunderstanding not only prejudiced the defendant's right to fair trial but also drew attention to the variations in legal standards across jurisdictions.

Moreover, as Al-Tarawneh articulates, the implications of translation errors extend beyond mere court cases, influencing the integrity of international treaties and agreements [Al-Tarawneh, 2024; 15]. For example, during the drafting of an international environmental treaty in 2015, discrepancies emerged in the translation of critical terms related to "sustainable development." The misinterpretation unintendedly skewed nation-states' commitments and responsibilities under the agreement, leading to conflicts in enforcement and compliance. Such linguistic oversights elucidate how translation errors can shape the legal landscape, fostering ambiguities that complicate the execution of treaties across different jurisdictions.

The case of Garcia stands as another pertinent illustration. In this instance, the defendant's attorney relied heavily on translated documents for evidence. However, inaccuracies in the translations of custodial interrogation protocols misrepresented the voluntariness of the statements made by the defendant. The translated language suggested coercion where none existed, thus leading the jury to an erroneous conclusion about the admissibility of evidence. This outcome not only impacted the defendant's liberty but also placed a spotlight on the necessity for certified legal interpreters in jurisdictions where multiple languages are employed within the judicial system.

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Significantly, these cases underline the need for heightened rigor in the translation of legal documents and the complexities prisoners face where language barriers exist. When courts lack access to precise translations, the danger becomes twofold: not only are the judges and juries misinformed, but the foundational principles of justice—fairness, accountability, and truth—are jeopardized. Moreover, the chilling effect on the rights of non-native speakers within legal frameworks potentially perpetuates systemic inequities.

The detrimental effects of translation errors in legal contexts compel a reevaluation of how multilingual legal systems operate, emphasizing the critical importance of accuracy in legal translations. As jurisdictions become increasingly interconnected—where treaties and legal codes cross borders—formal protocols must be established to mitigate risks of misinterpretation. The intersection of law and linguistics thus demands interdisciplinary collaboration to safeguard the integrity of legal processes and uphold the principles of justice for all involved.

In sum, as we assess the aforementioned cases through the lens of linguistic precision, it becomes evident that translation errors not only have the capacity to alter individual lives but also to reshape global judicial landscapes, with ramifications that echo across borders, legal systems, and cultural contexts. The translation of legal documents extends far beyond mere linguistic conversion; it necessitates a profound comprehension of the cultural context that underscores the legal language of different jurisdictions. Legal concepts are often deeply embedded within the cultural, historical, and social frameworks of their originating legal systems. Piszcz and Sierocka argue that legal translation is inherently a cultural practice, highlighting the interplay between language and cultural nuances that can lead to significant misinterpretations [Piszcz and Sierocka, 2020; 534]. This intricacy is particularly salient in the context of international treaties and agreements, where the stakes are incredibly high and the potential for conflict can arise from seemingly innocuous translation errors. For example, terms that may appear straightforward in one language can be laden

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with meanings that are not directly translatable into another. This complexity arises from the fact that legal systems are shaped by the cultural values and societal norms of the jurisdictions they serve. In some cultures, the concept of "justice" might encompass restorative practices rooted in community and reconciliation, while in others, it may be conceptualized primarily in terms of punitive measures. A misinterpretation of such fundamental concepts can lead not only to flawed legal documents but also to decisions that diverge significantly from the intended legal principles, affecting outcomes in international courts.

Moreover, cultural context can influence how legal terminologies are used and understood. For instance, the term "contract" may carry very different implications across jurisdictions. In some legal systems, contracts are viewed as sacred agreements with strict enforcement, while in others, they might be perceived as more flexible, allowing for adjustments according to changing circumstances. A translation that fails to account for these cultural distinctions risks misrepresenting the intent and enforceability of contracts, ultimately impacting legal proceedings and international negotiations.

The case of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties serves as an illustrative example. The Convention articulates numerous principles deemed essential in international law, yet its language must be navigated carefully to ensure adherence to diverse legal interpretations influenced by cultural biases. Misinterpretations arising from inadequate translation can lead to disputes between states, affecting diplomatic relations and the efficacy of international law itself. Piszcz and Sierocka emphasize that such misinterpretations not only impact immediate legal outcomes but also potentially undermine the foundational understanding of legal doctrines on a global scale [Piszcz and Sierocka, 2020; 539].

In light of these considerations, the importance of cultural literacy in legal translation becomes evident. Legal translators must not only be proficient in the source and target languages but must also possess an acute awareness of the

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cultural nuances embedded within legal language. This cultural fluency is essential to bridge gaps in understanding and ensure that the essence of legal concepts is accurately conveyed. Failure to recognize and incorporate cultural context can lead to translation errors that perpetuate misunderstandings, resulting in flawed legal outcomes in court decisions and international agreements.

Therefore, the interplay between culture and legal translation cannot be overstated. It serves as a critical element that informs the accuracy and effectiveness of legal interpretations across jurisdictions. As globalization continues to create a legal landscape where diverse cultures intersect, the necessity for culturally-informed legal translators becomes increasingly paramount to safeguarding the integrity of legal systems worldwide. Translation errors in international treaties can have profound and far-reaching consequences, particularly when they arise from linguistic inaccuracies that distort the intended meaning of contractual obligations. Such misinterpretations can undermine the foundational principles upon which diplomatic relations are built, leading to mistrust and conflict among nations. Al-Shamayleh underscores this concern by detailing case studies where translation discrepancies have resulted in significant misunderstandings between parties, often exacerbating existing tensions or creating new diplomatic rifts [Al-Shamayleh, 2024; 53].

In international law, treaties serve as binding agreements that require precise language to ensure that all parties have a mutual understanding of their commitments. When translation errors occur, they can alter the obligations set forth in these agreements, rendering the comportment of different states toward one another ambiguous. For instance, an incorrectly translated term may suggest a less stringent obligation than intended, leading one party to perceive a loophole that the other did not foresee. Such errors can trigger disputes that escalate from negotiations to formal grievances, with foreseeable repercussions for international relations.

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The influence of translation on the interpretation of treaties is further complicated by the complexities of legal language and the vast array of jurisprudential traditions around the globe. Each legal system possesses its own nuances, and translation must not only convey the words but also the underlying intent and legal significance. When translators fail to grasp these complexities, the results can be disastrous. Al-Shamayleh illustrates this point through the examination of international commercial treaties that, due to translation inaccuracies, have led to litigation costs that dwarf the original value of the contractual agreements, thereby questioning the viability of international cooperation in commercial frameworks [Al-Shamayleh, 2024; 71].

The repercussions of misinterpretation extend beyond mere contractual disputes; they can destabilize diplomatic ties. The miscommunication stemming from translation errors can foster an environment where states perceive threats or breaches of trust, leading to retaliatory measures or breakdowns in negotiations. For instance, a misunderstanding regarding military obligations or territorial agreements as a result of translation errors can culminate in escalated military tensions or conflicts. Al-Shamayleh notes that diplomatic relations can be severely strained when parties feel misled or when their sovereignty appears compromised due to misinterpreted legal terms [Al-Shamayleh, 2024; 59].

The serious nature of these potential outcomes highlights the vital role that professional translators play in the formation of international treaties. Their expertise is not merely linguistic but also deeply embedded in the understanding of legal principles across jurisdictions. A lack of diligence in translation can ripple through the fabric of international diplomacy, illustrating that translation is not simply a technical task but an essential element in maintaining geopolitical stability. As international interactions grow increasingly complex, the imperative for accurate, nuanced translation thus becomes paramount, necessitating enhanced standards and protocols in the field of legal translation to mitigate the risks of misinterpretation and encourage a robust global discourse., Error analysis

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serves as a critical methodology for comprehensively understanding translation discrepancies inherent in legal documents. As elucidated by Kmiecicka, the arena of legal translation is fraught with complexities that demand precision and a nuanced understanding of legal language [Kmiecicka, 2021; 171]. Even minor inaccuracies in translation can have significant ramifications, leading not only to misinterpretations but also to legal consequences that may unwittingly alter the trajectory of judicial outcomes, influence the formulation of international treaties, and distort the fundamental understanding of laws across different jurisdictions. Legal documents are laden with terminology that often lacks direct equivalents in other languages. For instance, concepts such as "due process," "mens rea," and "estoppel" carry specific legal connotations that may be rooted in the cultural and legal contexts of the originating language. When these terms are inaccurately translated, the resultant error can create a ripple effect throughout the entire legal framework involved. Special attention must be paid to the potential for mistranslation to compromise a court's ability to render justice based on the intended meaning of the law.

The systematic approach to error analysis advocated by Kmiecicka involves a categorization of errors, ranging from lexical to syntactic, and including more complex pragmatic failures that may arise from cultural mismatches. Lexical errors occur when legal terms are translated using incorrect or non-standard words that do not encapsulate the true legal essence [Kmiecicka, 2021; 193]. For example, translating the term "contract" simply as "agreement" overlooks the binding nature of contractual obligations and the potential legal recourse that arises from breach. Syntactic errors arise when the structure of a sentence is altered in translation, leading to changes in meaning that may confuse the reader regarding obligations or rights specified in the legal text. Pragmatic errors can distort the intended message due to failure to consider contextual nuances, ultimately impacting how laws are interpreted and enforced.

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The implications of these translation errors extend into the judicial realm, where they can compromise a fair trial and lead to wrongful judgments based on flawed legal texts. An analysis by Kmiecicka indicates that such errors have resulted in notable court cases where the misinterpretation of translated legal documents altered the course of legal proceedings. Selected examples highlight how the amendment or affirmation of a decision hinged on elusive translation issues, drawing attention to the urgent need for precision in legal translation.

Error analysis also serves as an effective preventive measure; identifying common pitfalls in legal translation can lead to the establishment of best practices and guidelines that translators can follow. By incorporating systematic review processes and leveraging the expertise of legal professionals in translation tasks, the efficacy of legal communication can be significantly enhanced. Legal practitioners must recognize translation as an integral component of legal understanding and workplace justice, necessitating ongoing education for translators about legal intricacies and the perils of misunderstanding.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the application of error analysis sheds light on the multifaceted implications of translation errors in legal documents. These errors convey substantive risks to legal integrity and interpretative accuracy across various jurisdictions. Emphasizing the importance of precise translation and systematic review is not merely an academic necessity but a vital component of the legal process itself, ensuring fairness and clarity in legal discourse. The complexities of legal translation highlight a critical area for improvement in ensuring the precision and clarity of legal documents across jurisdictions. Bestué stresses the challenges of translating legal terms that may not have direct equivalents in other languages [Bestué, 2016; 577]. This discrepancy fosters ambiguity, which can precipitate misinterpretations. To address these translation challenges, a robust recommendation is to enhance training programs for legal translators and

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professionals. The training should focus not only on linguistic proficiency but also on a thorough understanding of legal concepts and context. This dual emphasis allows translators to better grasp the implications of legal terms, providing a clearer lens through which to interpret and translate legal texts

Furthermore, Orlando underscores the evolving nature of law in the digital age. With the increased reliance on technology for legal communication and document dissemination, there is a pressing need for legal translators to become adept in digital content management and the nuances of online legal discourse [Orlando, 2017; 83]. This requires a shift in training methodologies, integrating technology-focused curricula that address issues such as the digital transmission of legal texts and the potential for error in machine translation systems. Developing best practices for digital legal translation will be essential as legal systems globally become increasingly interconnected in an era of globalization.

The awareness of translation errors and misinterpretations within the legal framework must also extend to legal practitioners themselves. Lawyers and legal advisors should receive education on the potential pitfalls of relying on translated documents, particularly when engaging in international or cross-jurisdictional cases. Such training should emphasize that a translation is not merely a linguistic conversion but a contextual and legal interpretation that may have substantial ramifications for court decisions. Without this knowledge, professionals risk misapplying laws or misinterpreting legal principles based on erroneous translations. Additionally, fostering collaborative networks among legal professionals, translators, and academics can serve as a significant step toward enhancing the quality of legal translations. By creating opportunities for dialogue, stakeholders can share best practices, highlight common issues, and develop unified standards for legal translation. These collaborations can lead to the establishment of a comprehensive framework for evaluating and improving translation processes, ultimately contributing to a more coherent global legal environment.

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Finally, legislative bodies and international organizations should recognize the importance of standardized translation protocols. Establishing guidelines that mandate a consistent approach to legal translation—particularly in the context of international treaties and agreements—can provide safeguards against misinterpretations that may adversely affect judicial outcomes. By taking proactive measures towards improving the quality and reliability of legal translations, the legal community can more effectively navigate the complexities of diverse legal systems, fostering a clearer understanding of laws that transcends language barriers. This holistic approach, combining improved training, awareness, collaboration, and standardized protocols, can significantly reduce the risk of translation errors influencing court decisions and thriving international legal collaboration.

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ISSN 2760-4926 (Online) Volume 2, Issue 3, March 2026



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