International Comparative Jurisprudence

THE SEMANTICS OF LEGAL INTERPRETATION

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Abstract: The interpretation of legal texts is a complex and critical task, requiring an in-depth understanding of both language and law. This paper delves into the application of key semantic theories—referential theory, descriptive theory, use theory, speech act theory, verification theory, and truth-conditional theory—to enhance the precision and clarity of legal interpretation. Each of these theories offers distinct insights into how meaning is constructed, communicated, and understood within legal contexts. By examining the nuances of these approaches, the paper explores how they intersect with prominent legal interpretative theories, such as textualism, originalism, purposivism, and pragmatism, to guide legal interpreters in making more informed decisions. Textualism benefits from the direct, meaning-focused referential theory, while originalism is enriched by the historical depth of descriptive theory. Use theory and speech act theory shed light on the practical and performative aspects of legal language, providing new tools for purposivism and pragmatism. Verification and truth-conditional theories further contribute by ensuring logical coherence and truth alignment in legal interpretation. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates how semantic theories can deepen our understanding of legal texts and enhance the interpretive process, leading to fairer and more consistent legal outcomes. This interdisciplinary approach opens new pathways for bridging the gap between law and language, ensuring that legal interpretation remains rigorous, adaptable, and aligned with both the intent of the law and societal needs.

Keywords: Semantic Theories, Legal Interpretation, Referential Theory, Descriptive Theory, Use Theory, Speech Act Theory, Verification Theory, Truth-Conditional Theory.

Introduction

The process of legal interpretation is one of the most intricate aspects of the legal system, requiring a sophisticated understanding of language, meaning, and intent. Legal texts, such as statutes, contracts, and judicial opinions, are often complex, containing terms whose meanings may vary depending on context, historical usage, and the intent of their drafters or interpreters. Consequently, theories of meaning from semantics play a critical role in guiding legal interpreters—judges, lawyers, and scholars—in deciphering these texts and applying their principles to specific cases. In the context of judicial opinions, "application" refers to the use of these rulings as precedents to resolve disputes, ensuring consistency and adherence to established legal principles. Semantics, the branch of linguistics concerned with meaning, offers a variety of theories that can aid in understanding how language functions within legal texts. While existing methods of legal interpretation—such as textualism, purposivism, and the use of canons of construction—have provided significant insights, challenges persist in achieving consistent and universally accepted interpretations. For example, ambiguity in legal

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texts often leads to varied judicial outcomes, and disputes over legislative intent or the precise meaning of key terms highlight the limitations of traditional interpretive approaches. This paper explores the relevance of several key semantic theories to legal interpretation, examining how each theory can illuminate different aspects of meaning and potentially address these persistent challenges. The central question driving this exploration is: How can different semantic theories provide more precise, coherent, and effective tools for interpreting legal texts? Given the immense implications that legal interpretation holds for justice, consistency, and fairness, it is essential to understand the underpinnings of how meaning is constructed and how interpretive choices are made. This paper systematically examines several core theories in semantics—referential theory, descriptive theory, use theory, speech act theory, verification theory, and truth-conditional theory—and their application to legal language. Each theory offers unique insights into the nature of meaning, and each has potential implications for legal interpretation, depending on the nature of the text being interpreted and the goals of the interpreter.

A brief overview of the key theories in semantics reveals the diversity and depth of approaches to meaning. For instance, referential theory posits a direct connection between words and the objects or entities they denote, providing a straightforward but limited framework for interpreting legal texts. This approach works well when dealing with concrete legal terms but may falter when abstract or ambiguous language is involved. Meanwhile, Frege–Russell descriptive theory introduces a more nuanced distinction between the "sense" and "reference" of terms, allowing interpreters to account for the context and conditions under which a word refers to an object. This theory is particularly relevant for legal terms that have multiple or complex meanings, as it helps to clarify how different referents might be understood in varying contexts. Use theory, rooted in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, suggests that the meaning of words is not fixed but depends on how they are used in particular linguistic contexts. This pragmatic approach aligns well with the realities of legal interpretation, where the use of language in legal discourse—whether in contracts, statutes, or judicial opinions—often determines its meaning. This theory emphasizes the importance of understanding the conventional and contextual use of legal terms, providing a framework for interpreters to analyze how language is employed within specific legal settings.

Another significant contribution comes from speech act theory, developed by John Langshaw Austin and John Searle, which highlights the performative nature of language—especially in legal contexts. In this framework, language does more than describe reality; it performs actions, such as conferring rights, creating obligations, or imposing duties. This is particularly important in legal settings where utterances like "I hereby declare" carry legal weight and perform legal actions. Understanding the performative aspect of legal language can help interpreters grasp the broader implications of certain legal statements. Beyond these examples, verification theory asserts that the meaning of a statement depends on its verifiability, meaning that for a statement to be meaningful, it must be empirically testable or logically coherent. While this theory has been more controversial in its application, particularly in legal contexts where many statements cannot be empirically verified, it nonetheless provides a useful lens through which to examine the logical structure of legal arguments and the evidence that supports legal claims. Finally, truth-conditional theory, as developed by Donald Davidson, posits that the meaning of a statement is determined by the conditions under which it would be true. This theory is particularly relevant for legal interpretation as it helps interpreters assess the truth-value of legal propositions and arguments, ensuring that legal texts are interpreted in a way that aligns with the truth conditions embedded in the language of the law.

The integration of these semantic theories into legal interpretation is not a straightforward task. Legal texts are often intentionally vague, allowing for flexibility and adaptation to different situations. However, this vagueness also introduces challenges for interpreters who must balance the need for consistent, objective interpretation with the need to account for the nuances of language and meaning. The application of semantic theories provides legal scholars and practitioners with tools to navigate these complexities. For instance, understanding how a term's meaning can shift depending on its referential context or its use in different speech acts can offer insights into how to interpret ambiguous legal language.

Each of these theories, as explored in this paper, is also linked to a different school of legal interpretation. For instance, textualism, which emphasizes the ordinary meaning of the text, aligns closely with the referential and truth-conditional theories, both of which prioritize the direct meaning of words and the conditions under which statements are true. Originalism, which seeks to uncover the original intent of the framers of the law, may benefit from both Frege–Russell descriptive theory and speech act theory, as these theories allow interpreters to account for both the context in which the law was written and the performative actions intended by the legal language. Meanwhile, purposivism, which looks beyond the text to consider the broader purpose of the law, aligns with use theory and verification theory. By focusing on how language is used to achieve legislative goals and ensuring that legal interpretations are empirically supported and logically coherent, purposivism seeks to fulfill the intended purposes of legal texts. Finally, pragmatism, which evaluates legal interpretations based on their practical consequences, resonates with speech act theory and truth-conditional theory, as these theories help interpreters assess the real-world implications of legal statements and ensure that interpretations align with the truth conditions necessary for achieving justice.

Hence, the paper's objective is to illustrate how these semantic theories can provide more precise and effective tools for interpreting legal texts. To achieve this, the paper adopts a comparative methodological approach, analyzing key semantic theories in the context of their application to legal texts. By examining specific case studies and examples from statutory and judicial language, the paper evaluates how these theories elucidate the construction of meaning and resolve ambiguities in legal interpretation. This methodological framework allows for a systematic exploration of how semantic insights can guide legal interpreters—judges, lawyers, and scholars—in making more informed decisions. During the preparation of this work, we used ChatGPT in order to edit language, review and correct grammatical and spelling errors, ensure linguistic consistency and coherence, and standardize formatting of annotated bibliography, as we are non-native English speakers. After using this tool, we reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the publication's content, declaring adherence to the highest standards of scientific integrity. By aligning the interpretive process with the principles of semantic theory, the paper demonstrates how legal interpretation can better reflect both the letter and spirit of the law. Through this interdisciplinary investigation, the paper contributes to the broader discourse on legal interpretation, offering insights into how language, meaning, and law intersect in complex and often unpredictable ways.

1. An Overview of Semantic Theories

In the exploration of language and meaning, diverse semantic theories illuminate the mechanisms through which words and expressions convey meaning (Brink, 1989). These theories are especially crucial in legal contexts, where precise interpretation can profoundly influence outcomes. This section explores key semantic theories, including referential theory, Frege–Russell descriptive theory, use theory, speech act theory, verification theory, and truth-conditional theory. Each of these approaches offers distinctive perspectives on the construction, interpretation, and application of meaning, collectively enriching our understanding of the complexities inherent in legal language.

1.1. Referential Theory

Referential theory, often called direct reference theory, posits that the meaning of a word or expression is directly tied to the object or entity it refers to in the real world. The theory asserts a straightforward relationship between language and reality, where words serve as labels for objects (Soames, 2002). Understanding a word, according to this theory, means knowing the object it stands for. For example, the word "tree" refers to a particular category of plants, and its meaning is derived from the physical object it represents. This theory is central to legal interpretation, especially when dealing with terms that have clear, concrete referents, such as the names of people, places, or specific objects. In legal contexts, referential theory plays a crucial role in interpreting statutory language and legal documents. For instance, in property law, terms like "house" or "land" have well-defined referents in the physical world. The interpretation of such terms relies on the assumption that there is a direct correspondence between

the word used in the legal text and the physical entity it refers to. This direct relationship between words and objects ensures clarity in legal proceedings, where ambiguity can lead to disputes. Wearing (2015) explores the evolution of referential theory by emphasizing the combination of grammatical and contextual meanings, which is particularly relevant in cases where the referent is not immediately clear or where metaphorical language is used. Moreover, Witczak-Plisiecka (2006) introduces the relevance-theoretic perspective on legal language, which shifts focus from a purely referential model to one that considers the communicative intent of the speaker and the inferences made by the listener. In legal discourse, this inferential model is essential because it recognizes that meaning is often shaped by the assumptions and context of the communicative situation. For example, legal terms like "contract" or "negligence" may have specific referents, but their interpretation depends on the context in which they are used and the assumptions made by the parties involved in the legal communication.

Loiacono (2012) extends this discussion by addressing the translation of legal terms between different languages. He argues that legal terms can be viewed as proper names in the context of legal translation, meaning that their referential function within a specific legal culture is crucial. This perspective is important in international legal practice, where terms in one legal system may not have direct equivalents in another. By applying concepts of sense and reference, translators can develop strategies to overcome the terminological and cultural challenges inherent in legal translation. The role of referential terms in constructing and contesting identities in legal narratives is another critical aspect of this theory. Chaemsaithong (2018) explores how referential terms are used in courtroom discourse to shape the identities of defendants, plaintiffs, and other legal actors. In such contexts, referential language is not just about identifying objects, but also about influencing how individuals are perceived within the legal system. However, Brunet (2002) presents a contrasting view, suggesting that a strictly referential conception of meaning in the law may not be sufficient. He argues that legal language often involves abstract concepts that cannot be easily tied to specific referents, necessitating a more flexible approach to interpretation.

These studies collectively underscore the complexity of referential theory in the legal context. While the theory provides a useful framework for interpreting concrete terms, its application to more abstract or contested terms requires a nuanced understanding of how language functions in legal discourse. The direct reference model may work well for physical objects or specific names, but in areas such as constitutional law, where terms like "freedom" or "justice" are open to interpretation, a purely referential approach may fall short.

1.2. Frege–Russell Descriptive Theory

Frege–Russell descriptive theory, developed by philosophers Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, offers a more nuanced understanding of meaning by distinguishing between the "sense" (*Sinn*) and "reference" (*Bedeutung*) of terms. Introduced in Frege's seminal 1892 essay *Über Sinn und Bedeutung* (*On Sense and Reference*) (Hutton, 2009), this distinction forms a cornerstone of the philosophy of language. "Sense" refers to the mode of presentation or the conceptual way a term conveys meaning, while "reference" pertains to the actual entity or object that the term denotes in the real world. According to this theory, the sense of a term is the way in which it refers to an object, encompassing the conditions and context under which it refers to that object. The reference, on the other hand, is the actual object itself. This distinction allows for a deeper exploration of how meaning is constructed, particularly in cases where a term might have multiple or complex meanings. In legal interpretation, Frege–Russell descriptive theory is particularly useful for dealing with terms that have ambiguous or contested meanings. For example, the term "property" in legal discourse can refer to physical possessions, intellectual property, or even legal rights. The sense of the term "property" in any given legal context depends on the conditions under which it is being used, while its reference may vary depending on the specific legal system or jurisdiction in question. This theory allows legal interpreters to analyze the conditions that determine the reference of a term, leading to more precise and context-sensitive interpretations.

Linsky (2008) and Rodríguez-Consuegra (2000) explore the relationship between Russell's theory of descriptions and Frege's theory of functions. Linsky (2008) emphasizes the role of the theory of descriptions in Russell's logicist reduction of mathematics, arguing that his approach to functions offers a viable alternative to set theory in the analysis of mathematical and logical functions. This analysis is relevant to legal interpretation in areas such as contract law, where the conditions under which a term refers to a particular object or action are critical. Rodríguez-Consuegra (2000) highlights the influence of Frege and Peano on Russell's theory of descriptions, arguing that many of the key ideas in Russell's work were present in Frege's earlier writings. This historical connection underscores the importance of understanding the evolution of semantic theories in order to apply them effectively in legal contexts. Frege's principle that the meaning of words depends on their context is particularly relevant (Tennant, 2003) to legal interpretation, where the meaning of a term may change depending on the specific circumstances of a case. Pelletier and Linsky (2008) challenge Russell's criticisms of Frege, arguing that Russell's objections do not fully apply to Frege's actual theory. They suggest that some of Russell's critiques, such as those concerning non-existent entities, are more relevant to Meinong's theory than to Frege's. This distinction is important in legal interpretation, where the existence or non-existence of certain entities (such as hypothetical contracts or obligations) can have significant implications for how legal terms are understood. Pelletier and Linksy's analysis highlights the need for legal interpreters to carefully consider the theoretical frameworks they use when analyzing complex legal concepts.

Frege–Russell descriptive theory provides valuable tools for navigating the complexities of legal language, particularly in cases where terms have multiple meanings or where the conditions of reference are not immediately clear. By distinguishing between sense and reference, legal interpreters can develop more precise and contextually appropriate interpretations of legal texts.

1.3. Use Theory

The use theory of meaning, associated with philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, asserts that the meaning of a word is determined by its use in language. According to this theory, understanding a term involves understanding how it is used in various linguistic contexts, rather than simply identifying the object it refers to. Wittgenstein's famous aphorism, "meaning is use," captures the essence of this theory (Melville & Krkač, 2015), which emphasizes the importance of linguistic practice in determining meaning. In legal interpretation, use theory highlights the importance of considering how legal terms are used in practice, including their conventional usage, the intentions behind their use, and the context in which they appear. For instance, in tort law the term "negligence" has a specific legal meaning that is determined by its use in legal discourse, including court rulings, statutes, and legal commentaries. Understanding the meaning of "negligence" requires not just knowing its dictionary definition, but also understanding how it is applied in various legal cases.

Griffin (2020) discusses how use theory emphasizes the importance of understanding an utterance in its specific context. This perspective is particularly useful in legal interpretation, where the meaning of a term can vary depending on the context in which it is used. For example, the term "reasonable" in legal contexts often depends on the specific circumstances of a case, and its meaning cannot be determined in isolation from its use in legal discourse. Tomasello (2009) extends Wittgenstein's ideas by suggesting that meaning is derived from the social and communicative functions of language. He argues that language is a tool for social interaction, and its meaning is shaped by how it is used in communication. In legal contexts, this view emphasizes the importance of understanding the pragmatic aspects of legal language, including how legal terms are used to achieve specific social or legal outcomes. Tomasello's work is particularly relevant to areas such as contract law, where the meaning of legal terms often depends on the intentions of the parties involved and the specific social context in which the contract is formed. Horwich (2004) and Peregrin (2011) build on Wittgenstein's ideas by exploring the normative aspects of language use. Horwich argues that the meaning of a word is determined by the acceptance conditions of specific sentences containing it, while Peregrin proposes a normative version of use theory that focuses on the rules of language games and the propriety of expression use. These perspectives are

particularly relevant in legal contexts, where the meaning of legal terms is often governed by established rules and conventions.

Thus, it is clear that use theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the pragmatic and social aspects of legal language. By focusing on how legal terms are used in practice, this theory offers insights into how meaning is constructed and interpreted in legal discourse.

1.4. Speech Act Theory

Speech act theory, developed by Austin and further elaborated by Searle (Austin, 1955), focuses on the performative aspect of language. According to this theory, language is a tool not merely for conveying information, but also for performing actions. For example, the statement "I hereby declare" in a legal document is not just a description, but a performative act that enacts a legal declaration. This theory is particularly relevant in legal contexts, where utterances can create obligations, confer rights, and impose duties. In legal discourse, performative speech acts are prevalent. For instance, the language used in contracts, wills, and statutes often serves to create binding legal obligations. Fiorito (2009) argues that legal speech acts differ from everyday performative acts because they occur within a highly institutionalized setting. In legal documents, such as contracts or court rulings, the performative aspect of language is not merely social, but legally binding. For example, a judge's ruling is a speech act that not only describes the law but also enforces it, creating legal consequences for the parties involved.

Matczak (2013) critiques the application of speech act theory to legal rules, arguing that the latter should be understood as complex "text acts" rather than simple speech acts. He contends that speech act theory, which is suited to face-to-face communication, does not adequately account for the complexity of written legal texts, which are often applied in contexts far removed from the moment of their creation. Legal texts, such as statutes or regulations, are not isolated speech acts but part of a larger legal discourse that requires careful interpretation and application. Hornsby (1995) expands on Austin's ideas by emphasizing the communicative function of illocutionary acts. In her view, illocutionary acts are not just about the speaker's intentions, but also about the communicative action they perform. This perspective is particularly relevant in legal contexts, where the illocutionary force of legal utterances, such as the pronouncement of a verdict or the signing of a contract, carries significant legal weight. Understanding the illocutionary aspect of legal language helps interpreters recognize the performative power of legal texts.

Hence, speech act theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the performative nature of legal language. By recognizing that legal utterances do more than convey information, this theory highlights the importance of context and institutional conventions in legal interpretation.

1.5. Verification Theory

Verification theory, associated with the logical positivists, asserts that the meaning of a statement is determined by the method of its verification. A statement is meaningful if it can be empirically verified or is analytically true. This theory aims to distinguish between meaningful and meaningless statements by linking meaning to empirical evidence or logical consistency. In legal interpretation, verification theory can be applied to assess the factual basis of legal claims and the empirical evidence supporting them. For example, in criminal law, the meaning of a legal accusation, such as "the defendant committed theft," depends on the ability of the claimant to verify the claim through evidence. Verification theory emphasizes the need for concrete evidence and logical consistency in interpreting and validating legal statements. However, Mbat and Archibong (2013) critique the application of verification theory to scientific concepts such as time and space in Einstein's theory of relativity. They argue that the principle of verifiability is overly restrictive and excludes significant scientific statements that cannot be empirically verified. This critique is relevant to legal interpretation, where abstract legal concepts, such as "justice" or "fairness," may not be easily verifiable through empirical means. Mbat and Archibong suggest that a more flexible approach to verification is needed to account for the complexity of legal

and philosophical concepts. The limitations of verification theory in addressing abstract or metaphysical concepts highlight the challenges of applying this theory to legal interpretation. While it provides a useful framework for assessing factual claims, its strict focus on empirical verification may not capture the full range of meaning in legal discourse.

1.6. Truth-Conditional Theory

Truth-conditional theory, most notably developed by Davidson (1967), posits that the meaning of a statement is determined by the conditions under which it would be true. According to this theory, understanding a statement involves knowing what the world would have to be like for the statement to be true. This approach is particularly useful in legal interpretation, where the truth conditions of legal propositions can help determine the factual and logical coherence of legal texts. In legal discourse, Truth-conditional theory aids in assessing the truth conditions of legal arguments and propositions. For example, the statement "the defendant is guilty of negligence" can be evaluated based on the conditions under which it would be true. These conditions may include factors such as the defendant's actions, the legal definition of negligence, and the evidence presented in the case.

Duffley (2020) complicates the application of truth-conditional theory to natural language, suggesting that the theory misrepresents the relationship between meaning and form. He argues that the theory's focus on truth conditions may overlook the pragmatic aspects of language use, which are crucial in legal interpretation. Kusmanto and Pulungan (2022) attempt to revive the significance of truth-conditional theory by emphasizing its role in understanding the meaning of linguistic expressions in both legal and everyday contexts. Calzavarini (2021) introduces a new layer of complexity by discussing the foundational problem of truth-conditional formal semantics, particularly in relation to lexical competence. He argues that truth-conditional theory struggles to account for the cognitive processes involved in understanding and using words, particularly in the context of legal language, where meaning is often shaped by complex social and institutional factors.

Hence, truth-conditional theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the logical and factual coherence of legal language. However, its limitations in addressing the cognitive and pragmatic aspects of meaning highlight the need for a more comprehensive approach to legal interpretation.

2. The Application of Semantic Theories to Legal Theories of Interpretation

The interpretation of legal texts has always been a core aspect of legal theory, and the introduction of semantic theories provides a powerful lens through which legal interpretation can be examined. In this section, the focus is on four key legal theories of interpretation—textualism, originalism, purposivism, and pragmatism—to analyze how these legal theories intersect with the major semantic frameworks of referential theory, truth-conditional theory, use theory, and speech act theory. Each theory offers a unique methodology for interpreting legal texts, grounded in differing views on how meaning is constructed and understood.

2.1. Textualism

Textualism emphasizes the interpretation of legal texts according to their plain or ordinary meaning (Scalia, 1997) at the time they were written, without relying on extrinsic evidence such as legislative history or the intent of the author(s). This theory resonates deeply with certain semantic approaches, particularly referential theory and truth-conditional theory, both of which focus on the relationship between words and their meanings as fixed entities at a given point in time. The reliance of textualism on the ordinary meaning of words corresponds closely with referential theory, as referential theory posits that words directly refer to objects or concepts in the real world. Similarly, textualism seeks to interpret legal texts based on the literal, ordinary meaning of the words as understood at the time the law was enacted. According to this view, meaning is stable and directly tied to the text, which supports the textualist goal of minimizing judicial discretion and avoiding subjective interpretations that stray from

the original wording. Truth-conditional theory, meanwhile, asserts that the truth of a statement depends on the conditions under which it is made, and is also relevant to textualism. From a textualist perspective, the meaning of a legal text can be verified by examining whether it holds true under the ordinary meanings of the terms used, without resorting to external factors such as legislative intent or societal changes. Textualists argue that the text itself is the best evidence of its meaning, and that it contains all the information necessary to determine how it should be applied in legal cases. This approach seeks to ensure that legal interpretations remain predictable and consistent across different cases.

However, critics of textualism argue that this approach can lead to rigid interpretations that fail to account for the complexities of language and the evolving nature of society. For instance, Nehf (1994) contends that while textualism is often presented as a method to limit judicial discretion, it does not always achieve this goal in practice. Nehf suggests that judges in lower courts frequently employ a variety of interpretive strategies even when following textualist principles, resulting in inconsistent and sometimes contradictory rulings. This suggests that while textualism aims to constrain judicial interpretation, it may not fully succeed in doing so, especially in areas of law that are inherently ambiguous. Moreover, the relationship between textualism and semantic theories can become strained when dealing with the inherent ambiguities of legal language. Stallard (1987) proposes a two-level framework for semantic interpretation that addresses this ambiguity. He suggests that the first level of interpretation should focus on syntactic structure, with ambiguous words and phrases represented as free variables. The second level then resolves these ambiguities by assigning meanings based on the overall logical coherence of the text. Stallard's approach indicates that even within a textualist framework, some flexibility may be necessary in order to deal with the inherent vagueness of language.

Textualism has also been critiqued for its reliance on the concept of "ordinary meaning," which may be subjective. Mootz (2020) argues that the ordinary meaning of words cannot be fully captured through corpus linguistics or other empirical methods. Mootz points out that language is dynamic and context-dependent, and that legal interpretation requires a rhetorical and hermeneutical approach that goes beyond static linguistic analysis. He emphasizes that textualist approaches, especially those relying on corpus linguistics, may fall into the trap of treating language as a fixed entity, rather than acknowledging its evolving nature. The practical applications of textualism, as Serediuk et al. (2024) explain, lie in its ability to disclose the legal content of norms by focusing strictly on linguistic meaning. Serediuk et al. also suggest that textualist methods can help judges determine the proper meaning of legal terms and avoid interpretations that stray too far from the literal meaning of the law. This focus on linguistic precision can ensure that laws are applied consistently, even in cases where the text is open to multiple interpretations.

In addition to the referential and truth-conditional theories, textualism can also be understood through the lens of speech act theory, which focuses on the performative functions of language, such as how legal texts can create obligations or rights. Textualists may not typically consider the broader pragmatic use of language, but they do recognize that legal texts perform specific actions, such as enacting laws or conferring rights. By focusing on the performative aspects of language, textualism can ensure that the legal actions performed by a text align with its linguistic meaning, without considering extratextual factors like legislative intent.

2.2. Originalism

Originalism, like textualism, emphasizes the importance of understanding legal texts (Scalia, 1997) in accordance with the meaning they held at the time of their enactment. However, where textualism focuses on the ordinary meaning of words, originalism seeks to uncover the original intent or understanding of the framers of the law. This approach has been widely discussed in constitutional law, particularly in the interpretation of the US Constitution. Originalism aligns closely with historical approaches to semantics, particularly referential theory, which seeks to identify the specific referents of terms as they were understood when the text was created. In legal contexts, originalism emphasizes the importance of understanding how the framers of a legal text would have understood its language. This

historical focus can help to preserve the original meaning of legal texts, ensuring that they are applied consistently over time. Setiawan et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of adhering to the original intent of the legislators in criminal law, arguing that this approach ensures that the interpretation of statutes remains faithful to the law's original purpose. Setiawan et al. also highlight how the originalist approach prevents interpretations that diverge too far from the text, thereby avoiding unjust outcomes. By focusing on the original intent of the legislators, judges can ensure that their interpretations are aligned with the societal values that underpinned the creation of the law.

In the context of constitutional law, originalism has evolved from focusing solely on the framers' intent to prioritizing the original public meaning of the text. Palguna and Atmaja (2023) trace this shift, noting that modern originalists seek to understand how the public would have understood the Constitution at the time of its ratification. This shift in focus reflects a broader debate between originalists and non-originalists, with the latter advocating for more dynamic interpretations that take into account contemporary societal changes and values. New originalism, as described by Solum (2013), builds on these ideas by introducing the public meaning thesis and the interpretation-construction distinction. The public meaning thesis asserts that the meaning of the Constitution is fixed at the time of its enactment, and that constitutional interpretation should be constrained by this original meaning. However, Solum acknowledges that some constitutional provisions are inherently vague, creating a "construction zone" where judicial discretion is necessary to resolve ambiguities. This acknowledgment introduces a degree of flexibility into the originalist framework, allowing for normative considerations in constitutional interpretation.

Like referential theory, originalism seeks to identify the referents of terms as they were understood at the time of the text's creation. It also aligns with Frege–Russell descriptive theory, which distinguishes between the sense and reference of terms. In the context of originalism, the sense of a term can be understood as the historical context in which it was used, while the reference is the specific legal concept or object to which the term refers. This distinction helps originalists to maintain a clear focus on the historical meaning of terms while also ensuring that their interpretations are grounded in the legal realities of the time. Speech act theory is also relevant to originalism, particularly in its focus on the performative actions of legal texts. Originalists may use speech act theory to understand the performative intentions of the framers of a legal text, ensuring that the legal actions performed by the text align with the historical intentions behind its enactment. This focus on historical intention helps originalists to maintain a consistent approach to legal interpretation, even in cases where the text itself may be ambiguous or open to multiple interpretations.

Despite these strengths, originalism has faced significant criticism, particularly from those who argue that it fails to account for the evolving nature of society and legal norms. Baude (2015) addresses these critiques by proposing an inclusive form of originalism, which allows for the incorporation of modern legal doctrines, such as precedent, as long as they can be justified on originalist grounds. This inclusive approach seeks to reconcile originalism with modern legal practices, while still maintaining a strong focus on the original meaning of the text. Smith (2007) argues that originalism persists as a dominant interpretive method because it claims to offer objectivity and determinacy in legal interpretation. Smith suggests that originalism's appeal lies in its ability to provide clear, objective answers to legal questions, which is essential for maintaining the rule of law. However, she also acknowledges that originalism's critics argue that this objectivity is often misunderstood and that alternative interpretive methods suffer from their own confusions about appropriate standards of legal objectivity.

2.3. Purposivism

Purposivism, in contrast to textualism and originalism, interprets legal texts by considering the broader legislative purposes and objectives behind the law. This approach often looks beyond the literal meaning of the text to achieve the law's intended goals, which aligns it with more pragmatic and use-oriented theories of language. Purposivism can be understood through the lens of use theory, which emphasizes the practical use of language in context. In legal interpretation, purposivists focus on how the language

of a statute is used to achieve certain legislative goals, rather than strictly adhering to the literal meaning of the text. This approach recognizes that legal texts are often written to serve specific purposes, and that understanding these purposes is essential for accurate interpretation. Herz (2009) argues that administrative agencies are often better suited than courts to apply purposivist interpretation due to their technical expertise and closer connection to the legislative process. Herz further suggests that agencies, by virtue of their legislative functions, are better positioned to determine whether departures from the literal text are necessary to achieve the law's intended purpose. This view highlights the flexibility of purposivism, as it allows interpreters to consider the practical implications of a law in real-world contexts.

However, purposivism has its critics, particularly when it comes to constitutional and tax law. Lonnquist (2003) warns that a purposive approach to taxation legislation could threaten the separation of powers by allowing judges to infer legislative intent beyond the text of the statute. This, he argues, could lead to judicial overreach and undermine the clarity and predictability of tax laws, ultimately threatening taxpayer rights. Lonnquist advocates for maintaining a literal approach to legal interpretation in order to preserve legal clarity and protect fundamental rights. Oliphant (2015) echoes similar concerns, particularly regarding the expansive application of purposivism in constitutional law. He argues that overly broad interpretations of constitutional purposes can undermine the rule of law and the legitimacy of judicial review. Oliphant emphasizes that the text of the Constitution should serve as a boundary for judicial interpretation, ensuring that courts do not overstep their authority by straying too far from the literal meaning of the text.

Purposivism's relationship with semantic theories is multifaceted. While referential theory may seem too limiting for purposivists, who often look beyond direct referents to broader legislative goals, Frege–Russell descriptive theory's distinction between sense and reference can be useful. By capturing both the specific terms of a statute and the broader purposes behind them, purposivists can ensure that their interpretations align with legislative intent. Use theory is particularly relevant to purposivism, as it emphasizes the importance of language in achieving practical goals. Purposivists, like those who follow use theory, focus on the practical application of legal texts, seeking to ensure that laws are interpreted in ways that fulfill their intended purposes. Speech act theory also plays a role in purposivist interpretation as it helps to clarify the actions performed by legal texts, ensuring that their performative functions align with legislative objectives. While purposivism may diverge from the strict empirical focus of verification theory, it still benefits from truth-conditional theory by ensuring that legal interpretations align with the conditions under which the law's purposes would be fulfilled. In this way, purposivism ensures that legal texts are interpreted in a manner that reflects both the letter and spirit of the law.

2.4. Pragmatism

Pragmatism, as a legal interpretive theory, focuses on the practical consequences and real-world impacts of legal rulings. Unlike textualism and originalism, which emphasize the historical meaning of legal texts, pragmatism is concerned with how legal interpretations affect society in the present and future. Pragmatism aligns closely with use theory and speech act theory, both of which emphasize the practical effects of language. In legal contexts, pragmatists focus on how legal texts are used to achieve certain outcomes, and how these outcomes impact society. Pragmatic interpretation involves considering not only the literal meaning of the text, but also the broader social and political contexts in which the law is applied. Macagno et al. (2017) explore the role of pragmatics in legal interpretation by analyzing the inferential processes involved in interpreting legal texts. They suggest that legal interpretation is inherently argumentative, involving the justification of meanings attributed to texts through interpretive arguments. Macagno et al.'s framework highlights the importance of pragmatic reasoning in legal interpretation, particularly when resolving interpretive conflicts.

Pragmatism's focus on practical outcomes may seem at odds with referential theory, which emphasizes fixed meanings and direct referents. However, Frege–Russell descriptive theory's distinction between

sense and reference can still be relevant, as it allows pragmatists to balance literal meanings with broader contextual impacts. By considering both the specific terms of a statute and their practical implications, pragmatists can ensure that their interpretations reflect the real-world consequences of legal rulings. Pragmatism also benefits from speech act theory, which focuses on the performative actions of legal texts. Pragmatists are concerned with how legal texts create obligations, confer rights, or impose penalties, and they focus on how these performative actions affect society. Ramakrishna et al. (2015) underscore the importance of pragmatics in legal norm representation, particularly in accommodating various scenarios under which norms should be applied. They argue that legal texts, despite their apparent clarity, often require pragmatic interpretation to cover all possible situations. This flexibility allows legal texts to remain relevant in a wide range of contexts, ensuring that they are applied in ways that achieve their intended effects. However, pragmatism also faces challenges, particularly in maintaining the stability of legal interpretation across different contexts. Vignolo (2012) raises concerns about how different interpretations of the same legal text can arise depending on the context. He suggests that semantic relativism, which accounts for contextual variations in the meaning of terms, might be a more suitable theoretical framework for legal interpretation.

Pragmatism's relationship with verification theory is more tenuous, as pragmatists often prioritize practical outcomes over the strict verification of meaning. However, truth-conditional theory can still be useful in pragmatist interpretations, as it allows interpreters to consider the conditions under which legal texts produce practical effects.

3. Comparative Analysis

Theories of legal interpretation each come with distinct strengths and weaknesses. For instance, originalism offers a stable foundation by adhering to the original intent or meaning of a legal text, ensuring continuity and predictability. However, it is often criticized for its rigidity and inability to adapt to contemporary societal changes. Textualism, focusing on the plain meaning of the text, provides clarity and minimizes judicial bias, yet it can be overly literal and can sometimes ignore the broader context or purpose of a law. Pragmatism, on the other hand, prioritizes practical outcomes and flexible interpretations, but this adaptability may lead to unpredictable results and accusations of judicial activism. Similarly, the purposivist approach, which seeks to fulfill the law's intended purpose, addresses gaps in the legal framework but can be subjective, depending heavily on the interpreter's view of legislative intent. The effectiveness of each theory varies based on the specific legal context and societal needs.

Textualism seeks to restore the semantic content of legal texts, clarifying legal norms (Serediuk et al., 2024). This approach is often favored for its ability to establish a shared understanding of the law, promoting long-term social benefits (Hannikainen et al., 2022). However, its application has proven contentious, especially in cases like the bankruptcy jurisprudence of the US Supreme Court, where it can transform statutory standards into rigid rules (Schwartz, 2001). Schwartz argues that while the Court often justifies its use of textualism by promoting the virtues of the rule of law—such as certainty and predictability—this transformation may limit judicial discretion and result in inconsistent interpretations. He suggests that the Supreme Court's commitment to textualism is more instrumental than genuine, as it inconsistently applies holistic statutory interpretations, relying on past legal practice only when convenient. This approach raises concerns about the legitimacy of textualism as a coherent interpretive method.

Textualism has also been criticized for being politically motivated and overly simplistic. Philipse (2007) critiques Justice Scalia's version of textualism, calling for a more nuanced approach that incorporates the goal of reaching satisfactory decisions in complex cases. He contrasts this with the hermeneutical theory of Hans-Georg Gadamer, arguing that objective interpretation is still possible, even when influenced by the interpreter's historical and cultural context. Philipse applies textualism to religious texts, revealing outdated doctrines that create a dilemma for believers: either accept modern knowledge or adhere strictly to the textualist interpretation, undermining the text's authority. The strength of

textualism is that it offers clear, predictable interpretations by focusing on the plain meaning of the text, which reduces judicial discretion. This clarity provides a stable legal framework for lawmakers and citizens alike. By adhering to the written law, textualism minimizes personal biases, upholding the integrity of the legal system. Meanwhile, the weaknesses of textualism involve the view that its rigidity often fails to account for the evolving nature of language and societal norms. Moreover, it often disregards legislative intent and broader contextual factors, potentially leading to interpretations that conflict with the purpose of the law. This narrow focus can overlook the complexities of legislative objectives, resulting in outcomes that do not align with contemporary realities.

Originalism has evolved into a sophisticated family of theories (Barnett, 2013; Huscroft & Miller, 2011). While Barnett argues that originalism exerts a "gravitational force" on legal doctrine by encouraging adherence to the original meaning of constitutional texts, Huscroft and Miller highlight its development into multiple methodologies that incorporate linguistic, moral, and political philosophy. However, critics like Berman (2009) argue that both hard and soft forms of originalism are flawed. Berman contends that while it is important to consider the framers' intent, originalism cannot be the sole determinant of constitutional meaning, as its application often leads to unworkable outcomes.

Baude (2015) presents a different view, suggesting that originalism is already embedded in our constitutional law, and judges are obligated to prioritize it. In contrast, Segall (2019) argues that originalism is often used as a rhetorical device by judges, and real-world judicial decisions are more influenced by personal values and political considerations than by originalist principles. The strength of originalism is that it provides historical consistency by adhering to the framers' intent, maintaining continuity in the legal framework. This theory also limits judicial activism, ensuring that changes in the law occur through democratic processes, and it is further hindered by the fact that determining the framers' original intent can be challenging due to incomplete historical records, leading to inaccuracies in interpretation. Additionally, the static approach of originalism may struggle to adapt to modern contexts, potentially leading to interpretations that are disconnected from contemporary values.

Purposivism focuses on interpreting laws in a way that fulfills legislative objectives (Weinrib, 2022). This approach is structured, progressing from text to purpose and then to context, ensuring that legal interpretations remain faithful to both the semantic meaning of the text and the social realities it seeks to address. However, critics like Herz (2009) argue that courts may lack the expertise to determine legislative purposes as effectively as agencies. Manning (2012) introduces the concept of "new purposivism," which aligns more closely with textualism by emphasizing adherence to statutory language while considering legislative purposes. The strength of purposivism is that it promotes interpretations that align with legislative goals, allowing the law to remain relevant and effective over time. Its flexibility is a key advantage, as it can adapt to changing societal contexts and needs. The weaknesses of purposivism involve the introduction of subjectivity, as judges may have differing views on the purpose of the law. This subjectivity can lead to inconsistent rulings and the risk of judicial overreach, undermining the principle of separation of powers.

Pragmatism emphasizes the real-world impacts and consequences of legal interpretation. It traces interpretive arguments back to their underlying presumptions, allowing for a flexible approach to interpretation (Macagno et al., 2017). Pragmatism is particularly relevant in dynamic legal environments, such as court interpretations and international law (Hale, 1996; Smolka & Pirker, 2016). However, Vignolo (2012) and Canale and Tuzet (2005) raise concerns about its lack of a clear theoretical foundation, which can lead to inconsistencies in legal outcomes. The strengths of pragmatism center around the fact that it ensures that legal interpretations are effective in practice, focusing on outcomes that are relevant and functional in real-world contexts. Its adaptability allows for flexibility in response to new challenges and societal developments. In contrast, its weaknesses concern the lack of clear guiding principles, which can lead to unpredictable and inconsistent interpretations. This approach may also increase judicial discretion, reducing the consistency and stability that other interpretive methods provide.

Thus, each theory of legal interpretation offers its own distinct strengths and limitations. Textualism and originalism offer clarity and stability, but often lack flexibility. In contrast, purposivism and pragmatism allow for adaptability, but they may introduce subjectivity and unpredictability. The effectiveness of these approaches depends on the legal context and the specific goals of justice and governance.

Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that semantic theories constitute indispensable epistemic instruments for refining the methodologies of legal interpretation. By systematically engaging with frameworks such as the referential, descriptive, use, speech act, verification, and truth-conditional theories, legal hermeneutics becomes more analytically rigorous, conceptually coherent, and responsive to both linguistic meaning and legislative intent. A salient contribution of this interdisciplinary inquiry lies in its capacity to juxtapose distinct semantic paradigms with major interpretive doctrines—textualism, originalism, purposivism, and pragmatism—without collapsing the conceptual boundaries between jurisprudence and linguistic philosophy. This alignment empowers legal theorists and practitioners alike with refined strategies for navigating indeterminacy, semantic opacity, and pragmatic variability in legal texts, while upholding fidelity to constitutionalism and the rule of law. Rather than endorsing a rigidly singular framework, this paper advances the merits of a syncretic and pluralistic approach—one that harnesses the complementary strengths of multiple semantic and jurisprudential traditions. Such pluralism fosters hermeneutic elasticity, especially in instances where rigid doctrinal orthodoxy proves inadequate in addressing the evolving complexities of legal discourse.

Ultimately, the incorporation of semantic insights into legal interpretation reinforces core juridical values such as clarity, fairness, and contextual nuance. It engenders interpretations that are not only theoretically robust and logically sound, but also normatively attuned and socially consequential, thus bridging the disjunction between abstract legal normativity and lived juridical realities. By re-situating legal interpretation within a broader semantic and philosophical matrix, this study affirms that law is not merely a normative edifice, but also a linguistically mediated construct. A more sophisticated grasp of meaning, encompassing both syntactic precision and pragmatic depth, thus fortifies the pursuit of justice in both its theoretical foundations and applied manifestations.

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