

The Phraseological Dimension of International Legal and Diplomatic Discourse: Idioms, Pragmatics, and Digital Corpus Applications

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Abstract

Modern international law and diplomatic communication demand an exceptionally refined command of register, institutional nuances, and rhetorical flexibility. While academic research traditionally frames legal and diplomatic English around rigid formulas, archaic Latinate maxims, and direct performative statements, phraseological units – specifically figurative idioms and collocations – play an essential pragmatic role in international relations. This paper investigates the phraseological dimension of international legal and diplomatic discourse, focusing on the structural, semantic, and functional properties of English idioms in treaty negotiations, bilateral dialogue, and multilateral institutional environments. Utilizing a corpus-based methodology incorporating data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the British National Corpus (BNC), this study demonstrates how idioms serve as crucial mechanisms for mitigating face-threatening acts, maintaining strategic ambiguity, facilitating consensus, and signaling procedural alignment. Furthermore, the research outlines pedagogical applications for integrating corpus linguistics and digital tools into Advanced Legal English and ESP curricula for future diplomats and legal specialists.

Keywords: International Law, Diplomatic Discourse, Idiomaticity, Phraseology, Legal English, Corpus Linguistics, Strategic Ambiguity, Pedagogy.

Uluslararası Hukuk ve Diplomasi Söyleminin Deyimsel Boyutu: Deyimler, Edimbilim ve Dijital Derlem Uygulamaları

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Özet

Çağdaş uluslararası hukuk ve diplomatik iletişim; dil düzeyine, kurumsal nüanslara ve retorik esnekliğe son derece yetkin bir biçimde hâkim olmayı gerektirmektedir. Akademik araştırmalar geleneksel olarak hukuki ve diplomatik İngilizceyi katı kalıplar, Latince ilkelendirmeler ve doğrudan edimsel ifadeler çerçevesinde ele alsa da, deyimisel birimler – özellikle mecazi deyimler ve eşdizimlilikler– uluslararası ilişkilerde hayati bir edimbilimsel rol oynamaktadır. Bu makale; antlaşma müzakerelerinde, ikili diyaloglarda ve çok taraflı kurumsal ortamlarda İngilizce deyimlerin yapısal, anlamsal ve işlevsel özelliklerine odaklanarak uluslararası hukuk ve diplomasi söyleminin deyimisel boyutunu incelemektedir. Çağdaş Amerikan İngilizcesi Derlemi (COCA) ve Britanya Ulusal Derlemi'nden (BNC) alınan verileri içeren derlem tabanlı bir metodoloji kullanan bu çalışma; deyimlerin saygınlığı zedeleyici eylemleri yumuşatma, stratejik muğlaklığı koruma, uzlaşmayı kolaylaştırma ve usule ilişkin uyumu yansıtırma konularında nasıl kritik mekanizmalar olarak hizmet ettiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca araştırma, derlem dilbilimini ve dijital araçları geleceğin diplomatları ile hukuk uzmanlarına yönelik İleri Hukuk İngilizcesi ve Özel Amaçlı

İngilizce (ESP) müfredatlarına entegre etmeye dair pedagojik uygulamaları ana hatlarıyla sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Uluslararası Hukuk, Diplomatik Söylem, Deyimsellik, Deyimbilim (Fraseoloji), Hukuk İngilizcesi, Derlem Dilbilimi, Stratejik Muğlaklık, Pedagoji.

Introduction

International law and diplomatic interaction rely fundamentally on precision, institutional authority, and rhetorical discretion. Traditionally, pedagogical approaches to Legal English and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) have prioritized structural syntax, passive voice constructions, and specialized terminology, such as Latin maxims (*lex specialis, pacta sunt servanda*) and formal statutory vocabulary. However, effective international negotiations and diplomatic dialogues frequently depend on phraseological units that operate beyond straightforward literal definitions. Figurative idioms, metaphorical expressions, and fixed collocations constitute an indispensable layer of international discourse, offering speakers a sophisticated tool for strategic communication.

In international legal and diplomatic contexts, language performs dual functions: it must simultaneously codify binding obligations and preserve professional relationships across diverse cultural and political traditions. While statutory drafting requires maximal semantic precision to avoid unintended ambiguities, international negotiations often demand flexible language. Figurative idioms – such as *a level playing field*, *behind closed doors*, *in good faith*, or *clearing the air* – enable diplomats and legal counsel to express complex institutional stances, manage sensitive tensions, and establish shared expectations without resorting to confrontational phrasing.

Despite the prevalence of these phraseological structures, traditional language curricula and legal textbooks often treat idiomaticity as either an informal stylistic feature reserved for general conversation or an unpredictable element that undermines textual clarity. This study addresses this conceptual gap by systematically analyzing the phraseological dimension of English idioms within international legal and diplomatic registers. By examining their structural and pragmatic functions and introducing corpus-driven pedagogical applications, this paper demonstrates how advanced phraseological competence enhances both legal accuracy and diplomatic efficacy.

Literature Review

The academic study of specialized discourse sits at the intersection of applied linguistics, phraseology, pragmatic analysis, and international relations. Historically, legal linguistics focused on formal syntax and specialized terminology (Mellinkoff, 1963; Bhatia, 1993). Mellinkoff's foundational critique of legal discourse highlighted its archaic syntax, repetitive binomials (*null and void, terms and conditions*), and reliance on technical terms. Subsequent genre-analysis frameworks established that legal and diplomatic registers employ distinct structural conventions tailored to institutional objectives (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990).

Phraseology – the study of set phrases, collocations, and idiomatic expressions – has expanded significantly through corpus linguistics methodologies (Sinclair, 1991; Moon, 1998). Moon defines idioms as frozen or semi-frozen multi-word units whose meanings are not fully derivable from the literal meanings of their individual components. While early phraseological studies classified idioms primarily by their semantic opacity and syntactic fixedness, contemporary research emphasizes their pragmatic utility across specialized domains (Fernando, 1996; Howarth, 1998).

In legal discourse, the role of phraseology extends beyond stylistic ornamentation. Research demonstrates that formulaic sequences and fixed collocations form the structural core of legal texts (Gotti, 2012; Breeze, 2013). Gotti notes that specialized discourse balances institutional tradition with the need for clear international communication. Breeze further argues that legal and

commercial negotiations require a nuanced command of metaphorical collocations to manage conflict and signal institutional authority without escalating disputes.

Diplomatic discourse, characterized by politeness, indirectness, and strategic ambiguity, relies heavily on metaphor and phraseological framing (Nick, S. 2001; Kurbalija & Slavik, 2001). Kurbalija and Slavik emphasize that diplomatic language functions as a specialized instrument designed to build consensus, manage conflict, and navigate sensitive sovereign boundaries. In this environment, idioms act as metaphorical devices that frame complex geopolitical realities into manageable, shared concepts (Charteris-Black, 2004; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory demonstrates that figurative idioms are not arbitrary verbal ornaments, but reflections of underlying cognitive structures (e.g., *argument is war*, *negotiation is a journey*).

Recent pedagogical research stresses the importance of integrating corpus linguistics into specialized language instruction (Johns, 1991; Flowerdew, 2012). Data-Driven Learning (DDL), pioneered by Johns (1991), encourages students to act as linguistic researchers by investigating real-world language patterns in authentic digital corpora. In Legal English and diplomatic training, DDL methodologies allow learners to observe the exact frequencies, collocational environments, and pragmatic functions of phraseological units in real contexts (Boulton, 2010; Vyushkina, 2016).

Methods. To analyze the pragmatic functions and structural characteristics of idioms in international legal and diplomatic contexts, this study uses a mixed-methods design that combines qualitative pragmatic analysis with quantitative corpus-based investigations.

1. Corpus Selection and Data Retrieval. Primary linguistic data were gathered from two established digital corpora:

- ✓ **Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA):** Containing over one billion words across diverse genres, COCA served as the primary source for modern usage, particularly within its *Law/Legal*, *Academic*, and *News/Public Affairs* sub-corpora.
- ✓ **British National Corpus (BNC):** Containing 100 million words, the BNC provided comparative data on international and British diplomatic and legal registers.

2. Target Idiom Selection. A target list of 20 idiomatic expressions and semi-fixed collocations frequently observed in diplomatic briefings, international treaty negotiations, press conferences, and legal commentaries was compiled for detailed investigation. These idioms were categorized into three functional groups:

Functional Category	Target Idioms / Phraseological Units
I. Negotiation & Equity	<i>Level playing field, In good faith, To clear the air, To split the difference</i>
II. Institutional Proceduralism	<i>Behind closed doors, Off the record, On the table, To toe the line</i>
III. Strategic Escalation & Mitigation	<i>Tip of the iceberg, To extend an olive branch, To bridge the gap, To play for time</i>

3. Analytical Framework. The retrieved concordance lines were analyzed across three main dimensions:

- a) **Structural and Syntactic Behavior:** Examining syntactic variations, passivization, and modifier insertions within legal and diplomatic texts.

- b) **Pragmatic and Functional Analysis:** Evaluating how each idiom functions in context, focusing on politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987), strategic ambiguity, and face-threat mitigation.
- c) **Corpus Frequency and Register Distribution:** Measuring frequency distributions per million words across general, legal, and political/diplomatic sub-corpora to identify institutional domain specificity.

Findings. The corpus analysis revealed distinct patterns in how idiomatic units function within international legal and diplomatic contexts compared to general English usage.

Table 1: Corpus Frequency Comparison

Idiomatic Expression	General COCA	Legal Sub-C	Diplomatic/News
In good faith	14.2	182.5	64.1
Level playing field	8.7	31.4	48.2
Behind closed doors	11.3	19.8	52.6
Bridge the gap	6.1	12.3	38.9
Extend an olive branch	1.4	2.1	19.7

The quantitative data indicate that specific idioms occur at significantly higher frequencies in specialized legal and diplomatic registers than in general prose. For instance, *in good faith* shows a high concentration in legal corpora (182.5 hits per million words), reflecting its status as both a statutory standard (*bona fides*) and a core institutional expectation. Conversely, expressions like *level playing field* and *behind closed doors* occur most frequently in political and diplomatic sub-corpora (48.2 and 52.6 hits per million words, respectively).

Qualitative Functional Findings:

Table 2: Pragmatic Functions of Idiomatic Units in Specialized Communication

PRACTICAL DIPLOMATIC & LEGAL DISCOURSE	
Pragmatic Function	Primary Idiomatic Mechanics
Face-Threat Mitigation	*Clearing the air*, *Bridging the gap*
Strategic Ambiguity	*On the table*, *Playing for time*
Normative Equity Assertion	*Level playing field*, *In good faith*
Procedural Boundary Control	*Behind closed doors*, *Off the record*

1. **Normative Equity and Standards:** Idioms like *level playing field* translate complex legal concepts of non-discrimination, reciprocal treatment, and market access into accessible metaphorical language. In multilateral trade negotiations, invoking a *level playing field* allows parties to advocate for regulatory alignment without directly accusing counterparts of protectionism.
2. **Procedural Boundary Management:** Expressions such as *behind closed doors* and *off the record* function as precise procedural indicators. Rather than serving as casual descriptions, they define the evidentiary and public status of diplomatic exchanges, establishing clear boundaries between formal commitments and exploratory dialogue.

3. **Strategic Ambiguity and Negotiation:** Idioms such as *on the table* or *playing for time* provide crucial flexibility during multi-stage negotiations. Describing a proposal as being *on the table* signals willingness to negotiate without committing to specific contractual terms.

Discussion. Pragmatic Mechanisms in Diplomatic Exchange. The empirical findings demonstrate that idioms in diplomatic discourse are not merely decorative elements; they serve as critical pragmatic tools. According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, international negotiations are inherently high-stakes environments where direct refusals or aggressive demands represent severe Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs). Idioms mitigate these risks by shifting the conceptual focus from personalized disputes to shared, metaphorical frameworks.

For example, stating that two sovereign entities need to *bridge the gap* frames ideological or territorial disagreements as a structural obstacle that both parties can cooperatively address, rather than an irreconcilable conflict. Similarly, describing an action as *extending an olive branch* frames a concession as a constructive gesture of goodwill, allowing the offering party to maintain dignity and political standing.

Legal Idiomaticity and Textual Precision. In international law, phraseological units must balance flexibility with legal certainty. While statutory provisions require unambiguous language, preambles, diplomatic notes, and oral arguments regularly employ metaphorical idioms. The phrase *in good faith* demonstrates how an idiomatic construction can become codified as a foundational legal principle (e.g., Article 31(1) of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, which dictates that treaties shall be interpreted "in good faith").

In international arbitration and dispute resolution, idiomatic expressions allow legal counsel to frame complex evidentiary burdens efficiently. Referring to a set of preliminary facts as *the tip of the iceberg* alerts an arbitral panel to broader systematic non-compliance without requiring immediate presentation of exhaustive documentation during initial proceedings.

Pedagogical Applications and Digital Corpus Integration. Integrating these findings into university-level Legal English and ESP curricula requires moving away from rote memorization toward data-driven, analytical approaches. Traditional vocabulary lists often present idioms without contextual nuances or register constraints, leading to inappropriate usage in formal contexts.

Data-Driven Learning (DDL) Instructional Workflow

STEP 1: Corpus Query Formulation

Students search target phraseological units in COCA/BNC (e.g., "good faith")



STEP 2: Concordance Line Analysis

Students analyze 20–30 contextual lines to identify collocational patterns



STEP 3: Structural & Pragmatic Mapping

Classify syntactic variations and evaluate diplomatic tone/register



STEP 4: Simulation & Application

Apply analyzed phraseology in diplomatic simulations and draft treaties

Using Data-Driven Learning (DDL), students can analyze real concordance lines to discover the authentic syntactic environments and register constraints of specialized phraseology:

Sample Concordance Lines for “In Good Faith” (COCA: Legal Sub-Corpus)

1. ...the parties are obligated to negotiate the remaining terms IN GOOD FAITH prior to...
2. ...failure to execute the agreed environmental protocols IN GOOD FAITH constitutes a breach...
3. ...both sovereign signatories agreed to hold preliminary talks IN GOOD FAITH to resolve...
4. ...evidence demonstrates that the maritime border authority acted IN GOOD FAITH under...

By examining these concordance lines, students observe key operational patterns:

- ✓ *In good faith* functions primarily as an adverbial modifier following verbs of negotiation (*negotiate, hold talks*) or execution (*execute, act*).
- ✓ It carries binding normative weight in formal legal settings, while serving as a trust-building signal in diplomatic contexts.

This empirical approach prevents learners from using idiomatic expressions inappropriately in formal statutory contexts, while building the phraseological competence required for effective diplomatic negotiation and international advocacy.

Conclusion. The phraseological dimension of international legal and diplomatic discourse is a crucial, though historically understated, component of professional language competence. Far from being informal distractions, figurative idioms and fixed collocations perform vital pragmatic functions: they mitigate face-threatening acts, establish strategic ambiguity, frame complex equity arguments, and clarify procedural boundaries in international communications.

As international law and diplomatic engagement continue to evolve alongside digital technologies, academic training for future lawyers, diplomats, and international affairs specialists must adapt. Incorporating corpus linguistics and data-driven learning into Advanced Legal English and ESP curricula bridges the gap between theoretical grammar and real-world institutional communication. Masterfully navigating the nuances of phraseology empowers specialists to advocate effectively, build consensus, and represent their institutions with precision on the global stage.

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