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Quality Assessment of Legal Discourse in European Directives

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Abstract: This article presents the application of a quality assessment grid to the analysis of legal discourse in European Union Directives, with a focus on the identification of nouns and noun collocations that present structural differences across language versions. Originally designed for evaluating the quality of official documents translated in Romanian courts of law, the grid is here adapted and deployed in a didactic framework within a Blended Intensive Programme (BIP) involving twenty-five students from seven different European language communities (Romanian, Spanish, Italian, French, Bulgarian, Polish, and English). The study uses "Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2025/539 of 18 March 2025" as its primary corpus. Through a structured three-phase workshop, students applied the grid to compare the English source text with the version written in their own language, then shared and compared results collectively. The findings demonstrate that the grid constitutes an effective pedagogical instrument for rendering visible the structural specificities of EU legal discourse and for developing multilingual legal literacy among translation and language students.

Keywords: *legal translation, quality assessment, European Directives, legal discourse, didactics, Blended Intensive Programme,*

1. Introduction

Legal translation occupies a unique position at the intersection of language, law, and culture. Within the European Union, this intersection is made structurally complex by the principle of equal authenticity: all twenty-four official language versions of any EU legislative act are simultaneously co-original, meaning that no single text holds the status of source text in the conventional translation sense. Yet the practical reality of EU drafting, where English has become the dominant procedural language, means that translators and language professionals must navigate between a de facto source and formally co-equal target versions (Strandvik, 2015; Felici, 2015). The resulting

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language, increasingly studied under the concept of the Eurolect (Mori, 2018), showcases structural features, standardised lexical variants and textual patterns that makes it different from both general legal language and from domestic legal registers.

This article contributes to the growing body of research on quality in institutional EU translation by presenting an analytical tool, a quality assessment grid, and tracing its application in a multilingual, pedagogical context. The grid was originally developed by the author (Ungurean, 2022, 2023) for evaluating translated official documents submitted in Romanian courts of law. Its core operation rests on the systematic identification and comparison of nouns and noun collocations across language pairs, revealing structural divergences that bear on translation quality and legal equivalence. The present study extends this instrument to the domain of EU Directives and places it within the framework of a Blended Intensive Programme (BIP) co-funded under Erasmus+ 2021–2027.

The corpus for this study is "Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2025/539 of 18 March 2025", authorising Estonia to apply a special measure derogating from Article 26(1), point (a), and Articles 168 and 168a of Directive 2006/112/EC on the common system of value added tax. This document offers a compact, terminologically dense example of EU legislative language, combining procedural framing, derogation clauses, and technical fiscal terminology, all of which generate rich material for the kind of nominal and collocational analysis the grid is designed to support.

This article is structured in three main sections, as follows: The first one focuses on providing a theoretical grounding in the linguistics of legal discourse, with attention to nominalization and collocational patterns in EU texts. The second section situates the study within the literature on quality assessment in institutional translation, followed by a third section which describes the quality assessment grid and its application in the workshop context. This section also presents the BIP framework and the three-phase workshop design. The fourth section analyses selected results, drawing on student-produced grid data. Last but not least, the conclusion section discusses pedagogical implications, concluding with a reflection on gaps and future directions.

2. Legal discourse and its linguistic specificities

Legal language across traditions is characterised by a high degree of nominalization, the transformation of processes and attributes into noun phrases that concentrate semantic and legal content. Tiersma (1999) identified this as one of the defining features of legal English, where abstract nouns derived from verbal roots (deduction, derogation, authorisation) carry the procedural and normative weight of legislative texts. EU legislative language intensifies this tendency because the need for cross-linguistic stability places additional pressure on noun-based constructions, which are more directly transferable across languages than verb-centred structures (Biel, 2014).

Noun collocations, fixed or semi-fixed pairings of a nominal head with pre- or post-modifying elements, constitute a primary site of terminological

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standardisation in EU law. Biel's (2017) taxonomy of phraseological patterning in legal corpora distinguishes between term-forming patterns (multi-word terms), term-embedded collocations, and lexical collocations, all of which are exemplified abundantly in Directive language. A phrase such as right of deduction or special measure derogating from is simultaneously a terminological unit with a precise legal meaning, a collocational pattern with distributional regularities across the corpus, and a translation challenge when the structural conventions of the target language differ from the source.

Research into lexical bundles in legal discourse has further confirmed the prominence of noun-based sequences. A recent large-scale corpus study of legal textbooks found that ninety per cent of discourse-organising lexical bundles are structurally preposition- and noun-based (Hoang and Crosthwaite, 2025), suggesting that nominal patterns function not only terminologically but also as the primary architecture of legal argumentation and legislative structure.

2.1. Variation in EU Legal Discourse: The Eurolect

The concept of the Eurolect designates the variety of legal language that emerges through the drafting and translation of EU legislation across its official languages. First proposed by Goffin (1994) and systematically operationalised in the Eurolect Observatory Project (Mori, ed., 2018), the term captures the hypothesis that sustained contact between the official languages, mediated through translation, has produced stable, identifiable patterns of lexical, syntactic, and textual behaviour that diverge from those of comparable domestic legal registers.

Biel (2014) conceptualises one dimension of this phenomenon through the notion of textual fit, the degree to which a translated EU text coheres with the conventions of the domestic legal tradition into which it is inserted. Low textual fit, or poor integration, may manifest as calque structures, unidiomatic noun phrase patterns, or syntactic elaborations that are motivated by the English source but alien to the target language grammar. For Romanian, a Romance language with strong inflectional morphology and post-nominal adjectival placement, the structural consequences of translating from English noun compounds and pre-nominal modifiers are particularly visible in legislative texts.

Variation in EU legal discourse can be studied at four levels identified by Biel (2021): externally, comparing EU legal language with general language; internally, comparing text types within EU law; diachronically, tracking change over legislative periods; and cross-linguistically, comparing how the same EU concept is expressed across official languages. The present study focuses primarily on the cross-linguistic level, using the quality assessment grid as an instrument for rendering this variation visible and pedagogically productive.

3. Quality Assessment in Institutional Translation

Quality in EU translation has been approached from two principal directions: the institutional-normative perspective, which defines quality in terms of compliance

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with DGT guidelines, style manuals, and IATE terminology resources; and the functional-linguistic perspective, which evaluates quality in terms of fitness-for-purpose and legal equivalence across language versions (Drugan, Strandvik, and Vuorinen, 2018). Strandvik (2015) has argued that these two frameworks are not always aligned: a translation may satisfy institutional standards while still failing to produce the legal equivalence required for uniform interpretation and application across Member States.

The principle underlying legal equivalence in EU law is that all language versions must produce the same legal effect. Šarčević (1997, 2013) has repeatedly shown that this is an aspirational rather than achievable standard: terminological asymmetries between national legal systems, the absence of stable equivalents for EU-autonomous concepts, and the structural mismatches between source and target grammar all generate residual divergences that quality control procedures can mitigate but not eliminate. Assessment grids and error typologies have been proposed as tools for making these divergences systematically visible. The DGT's own Translation Quality Guidelines (2015) establish a risk-based approach to quality control, distinguishing between categories of text according to their legal impact and assigning revision requirements accordingly. ISO 20771:2020 on Legal Translation Requirements offers a more formal standard, emphasising terminological consistency, accuracy, and the competence profile of the translator. Both frameworks, however, are oriented toward professional production contexts and do not address the pedagogical dimension - that is, how quality assessment can be used not only to evaluate but also to teach.

In the training literature, quality assessment has been linked to the development of translation competence as a multi-component construct, for different types of specialised translation and by different translation schools (Dejica 2016; Dejica and Stoian 2016; Kovacs and Dejica 2025; Kovacs and Dejica 2026).

Models from PACTE (2003), Kelly (2002), and more recently Prieto Ramos (2014, 2024) include a strategic or methodological sub-competence that governs decision-making about translation solutions, including decisions about how to handle terminological and structural incongruities. Prieto Ramos's empirical work (2024) on revision performance by translators of varying specialisation levels demonstrates that domain-specific legal training significantly improves the ability to identify and correct quality deficits in EU institutional texts, a finding that supports the pedagogical rationale of the present study.

3.1 The Quality Assessment Grid

The quality assessment grid used in this study was first developed by the author (Ungurean, 2022) in the context of analysing translated documents submitted to Romanian courts of law. Its design reflects three core principles. First, it is text-driven: analysis begins from authentic legal texts rather than constructed examples, ensuring that the patterns identified are rooted in real institutional language use. Second, it is structure-oriented: rather than cataloguing semantic errors, the grid

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directs the analyst's attention to the formal properties of nominal and collocational structures, making visible the ways in which equivalent legal content is packaged differently across languages. Third, it is replicable: the grid's categories are stable enough to be applied by analysts with varying levels of legal expertise, including students at early stages of their specialisation.

The grid comprises six columns corresponding to the following parameters: (1) Source Text excerpt in Romanian; (2) Target Text excerpt in the target language; (3) Nouns (A) or collocations (B) identified in the Romanian version; (4) Nouns (A) or collocations (B) identified in the target language version; (5) degree of synonymy between the English and target language forms, classified as Partial or Absolute; (6) Observations, where the analyst records structural, terminological, or pragmatic notes. The distinction between A (single noun) and B (collocation) in columns 3 and 4 is fundamental: it directs attention both to isolated terminological units and to their combinatorial behaviour, which is often where the most significant cross-linguistic divergences arise.

ST (RO)	TT (EN)	Nouns (A) /collocations (B) RO	Nouns (A) /collocations (B) EN	Synonymy Partial/Absolute	Obs.

3.2 Illustrative Application to Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2025/539

The corpus for this study is "Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2025/539 of 18 March 2025", which authorises Estonia to apply a special measure derogating from Articles 26(1)(a), 168, and 168a of Directive 2006/112/EC on the common system of value added tax. The document is characteristic of EU secondary legislation: it opens with a series of recitals establishing the legal basis and factual background, then proceeds to operative articles formulating the derogation and its conditions. The legislative language is dense with noun collocations referring to tax concepts (right of deduction, input VAT, taxable use), procedural entities (implementing decision, special measure), and institutional references (Council, Commission, Member State). The following table illustrates how the grid captures the key structural features of this document across the English–Romanian language pair, as exemplified by student-produced analyses during the BIP workshop:

Source Text (EN)	Target Text (RO)	Nouns (A) / Collocations (B) EN	Nouns (A) / Collocations (B) RO	Synonymy (Partial / Absolute)	Obs.
special measure derogating from Article 26(1)	măsuri speciale care derogă de la articolul 26 alineatul (1)	B: special measure derogating from	B: măsuri speciale care derogă de la	Partial	Syntactic restructuring; EN uses participial phrase, RO uses relative clause
value added tax	taxa pe valoarea	B: value added tax	B: taxa pe valoarea	Absolute	Fixed institutional

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Source Text (EN)	Target Text (RO)	Nouns (A) / Collocations (B) EN	Nouns (A) / Collocations (B) RO	Synonymy (Partial / Absolute)	Obs.
	adăugată		adăugată		term; full equivalence
right of deduction	dreptul de deducere	B: right of deduction	B: dreptul de deducere	Absolute	Calque structure; noun + prep + noun preserved
taxable person	persoana impozabilă	A: taxable person	A: persoana impozabilă	Absolute	
implementing decision	decizie de punere în aplicare	B: implementing decision	B: decizie de punere în aplicare	Partial	EN uses nominal compound; RO expands to prepositional phrase - structural divergence
business use	utilizare în scopuri de activitate economică	B: business use	B: utilizare în scopuri de activitate economică	Partial	Significant lexical expansion in RO; Eurolect elaboration pattern

Table 1. Quality Assessment Grid – Extract from Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2025/539 (EN–RO). Source: student-produced data from BIP workshop, Phase 2 (author's compilation).

Even within this small extract, the grid reveals a consistent pattern: terminological units that are rendered with Absolute synonymy tend to be fixed institutional terms (value added tax, taxable person, right of deduction) that have stabilised through decades of directive translation and are now embedded in IATE and national transposing legislation. Partial synonymy, by contrast, arises wherever a structural mismatch exists between the English construction and the target language's grammatical preferences. The phrase “implementing decision”, for instance, is a pre-nominal participial compound in English (Noun + Verb-ing) that Romanian renders as “decizie de punere în aplicare”- a prepositional phrase expansion that follows the Romance pattern of noun + prepositional phrase but elaborates significantly on the source structure. This is precisely the kind of cross-linguistic structural divergence that Biel's textual fit framework and the Eurolect hypothesis would predict.

3.3 The Blended Intensive Workshop: Design and Implementation

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Blended Intensive Programmes are a funding instrument introduced in the Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027, designed to support short, intensive, innovative courses combining physical mobility (five to thirty days) with a compulsory virtual component. The format explicitly aims to reach student populations for whom long-term mobility is not feasible, promoting inclusion and methodological innovation. The workshop reported here was conducted within a BIP involving participants from multiple European higher education institutions, bringing together twenty-five students speaking seven languages: Romanian, Spanish, Italian, French, Bulgarian, Polish, and English.

This multilingual composition was a constitutive feature of the workshop's design rather than an incidental circumstance. The aim was to exploit linguistic diversity as an analytical resource: by having students apply the grid to the version of Implementing Decision 2025/539 written in their own language and then compare results collectively, the workshop transformed the EU principle of equal authenticity into a concrete, observable phenomenon. Students who might otherwise encounter EU multilingualism as an abstract institutional commitment were invited to experience it as a set of measurable structural choices, visible in the nominal and collocational patterns of the six target language versions.

The workshop was designed to last ninety minutes and was organised into three sequential phases, each with a distinct pedagogical function.

Phase 1: Theoretical Input (30 minutes). The first phase introduced participants to two bodies of knowledge: the structure and functions of EU Implementing Decisions, and the analytical framework of the quality assessment grid. Students received a brief presentation on the characteristics of EU legislative discourse, with attention to the role of nominalization, the significance of fixed collocations in legal terminology, and the principle of equal authenticity as it applies to directive language. The relevance of the distinction between Absolute and Partial synonymy was explained through comparative examples drawn from earlier applications of the grid to Romanian court documents (Ungurean, 2022, 2023). This phase served both an informational and a sensitising function: students needed not only to understand what they would be looking for, but to develop an awareness of why nominal and collocational structure matters for legal equivalence.

Phase 2: Individual Analysis (30 minutes). In the second phase, each student received the English version of “Implementing Decision (EU) 2025/539” alongside a blank quality assessment grid and the version of the same document in their own language, accessed via EUR-Lex. Working individually, students identified nouns and noun collocations in the English text, located their equivalents in the target language version, and completed the grid's six columns. The thirty-minute time constraint encouraged selective rather than exhaustive analysis, prompting students to prioritise the most terminologically dense passages, the recitals and operative articles, where structural divergence is most consequential for legal interpretation. The blank

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grid functioned as a structured observation frame, directing students' attention to specific linguistic features they might not have noticed in unguided reading.

Phase 3: Dissemination and Comparison (30 minutes). The third and final phase was dedicated to sharing and comparing results. Students presented the structures they had identified in their respective language versions, and the group collectively compared the equivalents found across the six target languages for the same English source structures. This phase produced the most pedagogically rich material: students observed, for instance, that the English compound implementing decision expands into prepositional phrase constructions across all Romance language versions (French: décision d'exécution, Italian: decisione di esecuzione, Spanish: decisión de ejecución, Romanian: decizie de punere în aplicare), but that the Romanian version is notably more elaborate, a reflection of the calque-resistance of Romanian nominal morphology. Similarly, the English noun compound business use generates widely diverging target language structures, from the relatively compact French "usage professionnel" to the markedly expanded Romanian "utilizare în scopuri de activitate economică", illustrating the Eurolect pattern of lexical elaboration described by Biel (2014).

4. Discussion: Findings and Patterns

Across the student-produced grids, two patterns in the distribution of synonymy types are consistently observed. Absolute synonymy is concentrated among fixed institutional terms, those that have been stabilised through long-term directive transposition and are now registered in authoritative terminological resources such as IATE. "Value added tax" equal for romanian "taxa pe valoarea adăugată", "taxable person" as romanian "persoana impozabilă", and "right of deduction" as "dreptul de deducere" all belong to this category. Their cross-linguistic stability reflects not the transparency of the concepts themselves, but the institutional effort to standardise translation solutions across directive generations.

Partial synonymy, by contrast, clusters around two types of structure. The first is compound nominal expressions in English that have no direct morphological equivalent in the target language, "implementing decision" being the clearest example from the present corpus. The second is collocations involving participial post-modification — the phrase special measure derogating from, for instance, which English encodes as a compact participial phrase and which most target languages, including Romanian, translate as a noun phrase followed by a relative clause (măsuri speciale care derogă de la). This distinction has implications for quality assessment: a grid that focuses exclusively on semantic equivalence would classify both types of divergence as successful translations, since the legal meaning is preserved. The present grid, by directing attention to the structural dimension, makes visible a further layer of variation that may affect the text's readability for specialists trained in different legal systems, its searchability in documentary databases, and its stability as a terminological reference point for future drafting.

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4.1 Cross-linguistic Patterns: What the Multilingual Comparison Reveals

The comparison across the six target language versions, conducted collectively in Phase 3, produced a set of observations that would not have been accessible in a bilingual analysis. The most significant of these concerns the differentiated behaviour of the Romance languages in the sample. Spanish and Italian show a higher degree of structural convergence with English than French and Romanian: the Spanish "decisión de ejecución" and the Italian "decisione di esecuzione" are both close calques of the English compound, whereas the Romanian "decizie de punere în aplicare" is more elaborated. This suggests that the degree of lexical elaboration in EU translation may correlate with the morphosyntactic distance between the source language and the target, a hypothesis worth pursuing in future corpus-based work.

Bulgarian, as the only non-Romance, non-Germanic language in the sample, presented a distinctive set of challenges. Students working with the Bulgarian version reported greater difficulty in identifying direct collocational equivalents, and their Observations column contained a higher proportion of structural comments — an informal finding consistent with the hypothesis that Slavic languages, with their case morphology and different nominal modification conventions, generate more structural divergence in EU legislative translation than Romance languages do (cf. the Polish findings in Biel's work on legal phraseology). These cross-linguistic comparisons illustrate the specific value of a multilingual BIP format for legal discourse analysis: they produce comparative data that no single bilingual classroom could generate, and they make the structural diversity of the EU's linguistic landscape experientially, rather than merely abstractly, available to students.

4.2. Pedagogical Implications

The workshop described in this article operates at the intersection of two areas of pedagogical concern that have been developed largely in parallel in the literature: the didactics of legal translation and the use of quality assessment as a learning tool.

In legal translation pedagogy, there is broad consensus that trainees need to develop both a general translator competence and a domain-specific legal thematic competence (Way, 2020; Prieto Ramos, 2014; Cao, 2007). The challenge identified by several researchers is that the acquisition of legal thematic knowledge is slow, requiring sustained exposure to authentic legal texts and to the comparative legal analysis needed to handle conceptual incongruities between systems (Orozco Jutorán, 2024; Klabal, 2024). The quality assessment grid addresses this challenge in a specific way: by directing students' attention to the formal structure of noun phrases and collocations, it provides a tractable analytical entry point into legal language that does not presuppose advanced legal knowledge. Students do not need to understand VAT law to observe that implementing decision and decizie de punere în aplicare are structurally non-parallel; they need only to apply the grid's categories consistently and note what they find.

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At the same time, the grid supports the development of what Prieto Ramos (2014) calls strategic or methodological competence: the ability to make principled decisions about translation solutions by reasoning from the communicative situation and the target text's purpose. When students observe in Phase 3 that all six target language versions use different structures for the same English source collocation, and when they discuss why, they are engaging in precisely the kind of comparative legal-linguistic reasoning that underlines professional quality assurance. The BIP format itself offers pedagogical affordances that conventional classroom settings cannot replicate. The linguistic diversity of the participant group transforms the comparison phase into a form of collaborative knowledge production: each student contributes a fragment of the multilingual picture that none can see individually. This aligns with the social constructivist framework of Kiraly (2000), who argued that authentic collaborative tasks produce richer competence development than individual exercises, because they embed the learner in the social and communicative conditions of professional practice.

5. Conclusion

This article has presented a quality assessment grid as a dual-purpose instrument: a tool for analysing the structural divergences in noun and noun collocation patterns across language versions of EU Implementing Decisions, and a pedagogical device for developing multilingual legal literacy in translation students. Its application to Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2025/539 within a BIP involving twenty-five students from seven language communities has demonstrated both the instrument's analytical productivity and its feasibility in an intensive, multilingual teaching context.

The key findings can be summarised as follows; First, the distribution of Absolute and Partial synonymy in the grid results tracks closely onto the distinction between institutionally stabilised terminology and structurally variable collocations: fixed terms achieve cross-linguistic stability, while compound nominal expressions and participial collocations generate systematic structural divergence. Second, the cross-linguistic comparison enabled by the BIP format reveals differentiated patterns across language families, with Romance languages showing greater structural convergence with English than Bulgarian, and Romanian exhibiting a distinctive tendency toward lexical elaboration consistent with the Eurolect patterns described in the literature. Third, the three-phase workshop design, theoretical input, individual analysis, collective dissemination, proves pedagogically effective at introducing students to the formal specificities of EU legal discourse in a way that is accessible regardless of prior legal knowledge.

Several directions for future research are suggested by these findings and the most urgent is the development of a larger, longitudinal corpus study using the grid to track nominal and collocational divergence across multiple Implementing Decisions and Directives in the six target languages of this study, including Romanian, a language that remains underrepresented in EU translation studies despite the volume

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of EU documents transposed into Romanian since accession in 2007.

A second direction involves refining the Partial/Absolute synonymy distinction to accommodate a more graduated scale, perhaps a three-point typology that distinguishes between functional equivalence, structural equivalence, and terminological equivalence, which would increase the grid's resolution for research purposes while remaining usable in pedagogical settings.

Third, the BIP format as a research site for legal language pedagogy is itself unexplored: the present study is among the first to report empirical data from a BIP in the area of legal translation, and the methodological and institutional specificities of this format warrant dedicated attention in the literature on translator training.

In broader terms, this article situates the quality assessment grid within a double movement in contemporary applied linguistics: toward greater empirical specificity in the description of EU legal discourse, and toward greater integration between research findings and pedagogical practice. The grid, in its present form, is a point of articulation between these two movements, an instrument that generates analytically meaningful data precisely because it was designed to be used by language students, and that proves pedagogically effective precisely because it is grounded in the structural realities of the texts it analyses.

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