

Advancements of Forensic Linguistic Studies in China

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Opinion

The volume *Forensic Linguistics in China: Origins, Progress, and Prospects*, authored by Yuan Chuanyou, Xu Youping, and Lu Nan, chronologically reviews the research achievements by listing pivotal figures who are committed to shaping and advancing forensic linguistics in China. It highlights the features of this discipline based on a systematic inventory of theories, methodologies, and applications. Grounded in China's contemporary and local demands, this volume also yields insights into the nuances of the discipline and fills a significant gap in the international academic literature by focusing on legal and forensic linguistics in China.

Five chapters of the volume are divided into three interrelated parts. Part One defines the basic concepts and sets the tone for the whole volume. This introductory chapter commences with a heated debate on whether legal language exists, leading to controversy about the significance of legal language research. Known as the father of Chinese legal linguistics, Professor Pan Qingyun resolutely acknowledges the great value of legal language, shedding light on the subsequent research in the field. The authors then draw further distinctions between "legal linguistics" and "forensic linguistics". The former refers to the general language use in legal contexts, while the latter focuses on the study of language evidence in legal contexts. Since there is no unified code of evidence law in China, legal linguists in China embark on a distinctive journey during which linguistic evidence analysis receives insufficient attention. Part Two (Chapters 2-4) is the main body of the volume. This part retraces the evolution of legal and forensic linguistics in China with a detailed exposition of notable studies.

Chapter 2 revisits the emergence of the discipline, during which two groups of scholars delve into fundamental introductions to legal linguistics based on their respective academic backgrounds. On one side, Chinese language scholars take the lead in establishing legal linguistics as an independent discipline in three ways. First, scholars gain insights into the study of language evidence even earlier than Western forensic linguistics. Among them, the authorship analysis first appears in Professor Chen Jiong's comprehensive formulation of legal linguistics. Professor Pan Qingyun then approaches speech recognition through the integration of legal stylistics. Professor Qiu Daren places his interest in investigative linguistics, emphasizing the significance of linguistic analysis in judicial proceedings. Second, scholars realize the essence of legal language in their research. Professor Jiang Jianyun advocates for using plain yet precise expressions in legal documents, reiterating the necessity of developing this discipline. Third, the establishment of the discipline is also propelled by influential monographs. Notably, Professor Wang Jie's compilation of the first coursebook on "forensic linguistics" in China provides a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

On the flip side, foreign language scholars introduce the research paradigms of Western forensic linguistics and strengthen the theoretical foundation of the discipline. As the first master's and doctoral supervisor of forensic linguistics in Mainland China, Professor Du Jinbang contributes to training talents, establishing research resources and later constructing the Discourse Information Theory (DIT), which lays the initial groundwork for the disciplinary system of forensic linguistics in China. Professor Wu Weiping takes a leading role in his groundbreaking effort to introduce forensic linguistics and apply it in real cases by revealing the idiomatic features of the Chinese language. Professor Liao Meizhen's pioneering contributions are underpinned by his empirical study of Chinese courtroom discourse and the model known as the "Principle of Goal". Legal language studies have begun to localize in China, which emphasizes semantic and pragmatic analysis within the Chinese legal contexts. Following the division of the two groups above, Chapter 3 further details the substantive achievements. Chinese linguistic scholars adhere to the ontological analysis and highlight the social factors and communicative needs of legal language use. To ensure the accessibility and fairness of justice, Professors Pan Qingyun & Wang Jie claim that rigid expressions should be substituted with "social and living language" for equal discourse rights and effective communication.

Foreign language scholars concentrate on specialized research and amplify the theoretical system of the discipline. Professor Du Jinbang proposes a linguistic model of DIT in legal discourse analysis. His graduates have subsequently expanded the theoretical model and revitalized its application across various legal domains. Professor Liao Meizhen investigates the phenomenon of interruptions and formulation based on his first-hand transcripts of Chinese criminal court discourse. Unlike DIT's semantic analysis, his "Principle of Goal" adopts a pragmatic approach and addresses multiple dimensions of interaction, including discourse coherence, communicative patterns, and speech acts.

Influenced by Systemic Functional Linguistics, Professors Yuan Chuanyou and Wang Zhenhua are prominent in the field of functional forensic discourse analysis. Yuan and his team draw from new theories in functional linguistics and adapt them to social issues, particularly the discourse on anti-corruption, the rule of law, and community corrections. Wang is recognized for his notion of "legal discourse as a social process" from the perspective of discourse semantics and his research in multimodal analysis of courtroom discourse. Additionally, scholars engage in linguistic evidence analysis, legal translation and interpreting studies to meet the needs of cross-cultural communication. At this juncture, Chinese forensic linguists' probe into a broader range of social domains and make prominent contributions to theoretical innovation and practical application.



Chapter 4 delineates the prospects of forensic linguistics in China. The authors initially bring the “naming issue of this discipline” to the fore because the nomination implies the scope and features of relevant research. Given the special legal provisions, Chinese forensic linguistics has always undertaken legal and forensic linguistic research in its broad sense. At this stage, the analysis of linguistic evidence has also received increasing attention in the Chinese legal context, including authorship analysis and speaker identification. Furthermore, this chapter enlightens readers about the emerging research topics in the field. A succession of young scholars has noticed the global issues of cyberbullying and Internet court discourses. They achieve significant advances in emerging areas and keep abreast with the forefront of international research. Part Three (the final Chapter) concludes the whole volume by summarizing major contributions at each stage. The authors succinctly recap the theoretical and practical progression of the aforementioned influential scholars, underscoring the interdisciplinary nature and robust potential in guiding legal practices. They also reiterate the great significance of this volume that it provides a deepening understanding and promising insights into how legal language research in China proceeds.

The volume holds significance in several ways. Firstly, it heavily relies on empirical studies to enhance its practical references. Drawing on numerous real cases, court transcripts, interviews with legal professionals, and linguistic data collected from various legal settings in China, this volume provides concrete examples of how linguistic theories can be applied in real-world legal scenarios. Secondly, this volume foregrounds the nomination of the discipline by emphasizing the unique characteristics of its law systems as well as the breadth and inclusiveness of the discipline. Thirdly, by tracing the disciplinary evolution over the past four decades, this volume illustrates that the focus of Chinese legal linguistics has shifted from the ontological study of “language as object” to empirical investigations of “language as process” and “language as instrument”. This shift underscores the interdisciplinary nature of legal language that strives for fairness, social stability, and harmony in judicial proceedings. Fourthly, as one of the Cambridge Elements series, this volume contextualizes relevant research within the specific linguistic, cultural, and legal landscape of China, which offers unique cultural and contextual insights into the nuances of forensic linguistics in China.

Nonetheless, the layout of subtitles in this volume is somewhat inconsistent. In the “Development of Forensic Linguistics in China”, the first four subtitles are based on specific perspectives and theories, while the others focus on the contributions made in their respective fields. This arrangement may lead to some overlapping in the listing of research. A thorough exposition of DIT shows that the introduction to each professor and their theories seems unbalanced. Additionally, there are a few punctuation typos. For instance, while listing the features and functions of the static equivalence principle in legal translation, it would be clearer to separate each specific item by appropriately adding periods (including ‘the static nature of legal language, the informative nature of the translated versions, the stereotyped writing style, the rigidity of translation criteria, and the restricted readership of legal documents’). The term “legal and forensic linguistics” is enclosed with two different types of quotation marks (‘legal and forensic linguistics’). Similarly, there is an extra closing parenthesis in the term “China Association for Legal and Forensic Linguistics” (China Association for Legal and Forensic Linguistics)).

Overall, the whole volume is a highly valuable contribution to the field of forensic linguistics. Through detailed theoretical insights, empirical case studies, and practical recommendations, this volume provides a comprehensive and accessible introduction to the application of linguistic analysis in legal settings in China. The emphasis on the distinct features of the Chinese legal system and its interdisciplinary approach also renders this volume as an essential resource for those interested in the intersection of language and law.