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Language in Law: Using Coh-Metrix to Assess Differences between American and English/Welsh Language Varieties

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In this study, we add to the limited research on discourse differences between American and British language varieties. We used Coh-Metrix (Graesser et al., 2004), an automated tool that can process over 300 indices of cohesion and difficulty, to distinguish a specially constructed written corpus of law texts: American language variety texts (ALVT) and English/Welsh language variety text (EWLVT).

Our corpus, containing 408 commercial competition cases (ALVT=200, EWLVT=208), was randomly divided into a training set (n=200 texts), and a test set (n=208 texts). Using ANOVA performed on the training set, we selected the most significant Coh-Metrix predictor indices from each of five distinct categories: coreferential cohesion, casual cohesion, local-grammatical cohesion, latent semantic analysis, and lexical diversity. We then conducted a discriminant analysis (DA) with language variety as the dependent variable.

Results and Discussion

The DA derived algorithm when applied to the test set correctly categorized 177 of the 208 texts, an average accuracy rate of 85% (ALVT, Precision=.835, Recall=.860; EWLVT, Precision=.867, Recall=.843). As such, this initial study, offering compelling evidence that significant differences between English language varieties do exist, casts doubt on previous generalizations about British and American writing (Biber, 1987). The study also suggests that language varieties can be computationally distinguished by a tool such as Coh-Metrix.

Future research will assess the degree to which expert human raters can distinguish differences between such language varieties. We will also assess whether the differences recorded in this study extend to differences for ALVT and EWLVT when analyzing text material derived from expository and narrative text types.

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