



On the Collocation Patterns of Words in the Tariff Act of 1930 and Its Role in the Interpretation of Legal Provisions

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Abstract

The Tariff Act of 1930, which is also known as the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, enacted during the Great Depression, has had profound impacts on US trade. This paper analyses collocation patterns in the act to aid legal provision interpretation. Using a corpus-based textual analysis approach, it identifies main collocation patterns such as noun-noun, verb-noun, and adjective-noun collocations. These patterns express legal concepts and legislative intent, and play crucial roles in resolving ambiguities, revealing legislative intent, maintaining consistency in interpretation, and assisting judicial precedents and legal arguments. Research found that the most frequently used noun is "customs" and noun-noun collocation is "customs duties", the verb "impose" and verb-noun collocation "impose tax/duty/fee/penalty". The paper also provides case studies to illustrate the practical applications of collocation analysis in legal interpretation. By bridging corpus linguistics and legal hermeneutics, this research offers new methodologies for legal interpretation and enriches the understanding of legal language characteristics. However, limitations such as the relatively small corpus size are acknowledged, and future research directions are proposed.

Keywords

Collocation patterns; legal provisions; Tariff Act of 1930; legal interpretation; corpus linguistics

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Significance

The Tariff Act of 1930, also known as the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, stands as a landmark legislation in U.S. trade history. Enacted during the Great Depression, it aimed to protect domestic industries by imposing high tariffs on imported goods. Beyond its economic ramifications, the act has garnered enduring attention in legal and trade domains. Legal provisions within the act are intricate and densely worded, posing challenges for accurate interpretation. Proper interpretation is crucial for implementing the law, resolving trade disputes, and ensuring uniform application of legal norms. Against this backdrop, analyzing the collocation patterns in the Tariff Act of 1930 and their interpretive role becomes significant. It bridges corpus linguistics and legal hermeneutics, shedding light on the unique linguistic features of legal texts and offering methodological guidance for legal interpretation.

1.2 Research Objectives and Questions

The primary aim of this study is to comprehensively investigate the collocation patterns in the Tariff Act of 1930 and

to clarify their functions in legal provision interpretation. Specific research questions include: (1) What are the main collocation patterns in the Tariff Act of 1930? (2) How do these patterns assist in interpreting legal provisions? (3) What methodological insights do these findings offer for legal interpretation?

1.3 Research Methods

This study adopts a corpus-based textual analysis approach. A specialized corpus of the Tariff Act of 1930 was constructed, leveraging collocation analysis tools within corpus linguistics to extract and examine collocation data. Additionally, the literature review method was employed to analyze prior research in legal linguistics and corpus linguistics, providing theoretical grounding and comparative references for the study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Collocation Studies in General Linguistics

The concept of collocation was introduced by British linguist J.R. Firth (1957), who posited that words have affinities for certain partners. Michael Sinclair (1966) further developed collocation classification, categorizing it into types such as "node + modifier," "node + head," and "node + complement." Collocation encompasses the co-occurrence relationship between a node word and its partners within a specific span. It reflects the combinatory characteristics of words and carries semantic and pragmatic information. In corpus linguistics, collocation analysis has become a key technique for exploring lexical usage patterns and semantic associations.

2.2 Legal Language and Its Characteristics

Ondřej Glogar (2023) found the criteria by which legal language can be identified, and the author claimed that legal language is a part of language as a register that uses suitable signs and rules of their usage in accordance with the given communication and its purpose. Legal language distinguishes itself through rigor, normativity, and the extensive use of technical terms. Legal texts must convey precise meanings to prevent ambiguities and misinterpretations, ensuring the stability and authority of the law. Technical terms form the core vocabulary of legal language, such as "duty," "tariff," and "import," each with specific legal definitions and connotations. The syntactic structures in legal language tend to be complex, often employing long sentences and nested clauses to comprehensively articulate legal rights, obligations, and conditions. These characteristics influence the formation and interpretation of collocations in legal texts.

2.3 Previous Studies on the Tariff Act of 1930

Numerous scholars have examined the Tariff Act of 1930 from legal, economic, and historical perspectives. Legal studies have focused on the act's impact on U.S. trade law and its role in shaping subsequent legislative reforms. Economic analyses have assessed its effects on trade activities and economic development during the Depression era. Beaudreau Bernard C. (2018) analyzed the impact of the tariff (Smoot-Hawley Tariff Bill) news on the stock market performance in the electricity industry. Kris James Mitchener (2022) affirmed that the tariff retaliation initiated by the US is a mistake by presenting empirical and theoretical evidence. However, relatively few studies have explored the linguistic features of the act, particularly its collocation patterns. This study aims to fill this gap, offering a new linguistic perspective on the Tariff Act of 1930.

3. The Tariff Act of 1930: An Overview

3.1 Historical Context and Enactment Process

The 1929 Great Depression plunged the U.S. economy into a severe crisis. To shield domestic industries from foreign competition, legislators Smoot and Hawley proposed a bill to raise tariff rates on imported goods. After extensive debates and amendments, the bill was enacted in 1930. The legislation reflected the protectionist sentiments of the time and had profound impacts on global trade patterns. It triggered a chain reaction of tariff increases worldwide, exacerbating the global economic downturn.

3.2 Structure and Main Provisions

The Tariff Act of 1930 comprises multiple chapters and articles, covering tariff rate schedules, rules of origin,

customs procedures, and administrative enforcement mechanisms. For instance, Chapter I details tariff classifications and rate settings for various commodities, while Chapter III outlines customs duties and related administrative procedures. The act's provisions are logically structured and meticulously crafted, reflecting the legislative techniques and policy priorities of the era.

4. Collocation Patterns in the Tariff Act of 1930

Researchers carried out scientific work in various respects. Lavender, S. (2005) implemented analysis from legal and economic perspectives. Thompson, G. (2008) introduced the language of law. Hon, L. C. (2010) focused on the use of linguistic evidence in legal proceedings. Ward, P. (2010) studied the quantitative impact of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff.

Linguists conducted a series of research from the perspective of corpus linguistics. Fanego and Paula (2019) focus on corpus-based research on variation in English legal discourse, providing empirical support and theoretical insights for the study of collocation patterns in legal texts. Pérez, María (2022) offers a corpus-based comparative analysis of the evaluative lexicon in judicial decisions on immigration. In the chapter “Terms and conditions: A comparative study of noun binomials in UK and Scottish legislation” in the book *Phraseology in Legal and Institutional Settings. A Corpus-based Interdisciplinary Perspective* by Kopaczyk, Joanna (2018) provides a comparative study of noun binomials in UK and Scottish legislation.

4.1 Noun-Noun Collocations

Noun-noun collocations are prevalent in the Tariff Act of 1930. Examples include "customs duties," "imported goods," "customs laws," "duties and other import restrictions," "transaction value of imported merchandise," and "trade agreements." These collocations encapsulate core legal concepts of the act, such as the definition of "customs duties" as taxes imposed by the state on goods crossing national borders. "Imported goods" refers to commodities entering the country from abroad, serving as the regulatory target of the tariff act. The term "customs laws of the United States" means any other law or regulation enforced or administered by the United States Customs Service. The term "duties and other import restrictions" includes (A) rate and form of import duties and classification of articles, and (B) limitations, prohibitions, charges, and exactions other than duties, imposed on importation or imposed for the regulation of imports. The transaction value of imported merchandise is the price actually paid or payable for the merchandise when sold for exportation to the United States, plus amounts equal to—(A) the packing costs incurred by the buyer with respect to the imported merchandise; (B) any selling commission incurred by the buyer with respect to the imported merchandise; (C) the value, apportioned as appropriate, of any assist; (D) any royalty or license fee related to the imported merchandise that the buyer is required to pay, directly or indirectly, as a condition of the sale of the imported merchandise for exportation to the United States; and(E) the proceeds of any subsequent resale, disposal, or use of the imported merchandise that accrue, directly or indirectly, to the seller. Such collocations ensure precise expression of legal terminology, avoiding semantic ambiguities that might arise from individual nouns. In legal texts, noun-noun collocations often function as technical terms, carrying rich legal connotations and forming the foundational vocabulary of the legal system.

Table 1. Collocation of "customs " and "customs duties"

Token	Frequency	Left context	Right context
customs	1825	States /the...	service/laws/duties...
customs duties	54		
	28	total amount of	
	7		paid to the USMCA country
	6		paid to the NAFTA country
	1		paid to the country1 on the
	10		paid or owed on the materials (good) on importation

As seen in Table 1, in the Tariff Act of 1930, the collocation "customs duties" appeared 54 times, of which 28 times of expression is "the amount of (any) customs duties paid ". Among these, 14 of them are " the amount of (any) customs duties paid to the USMCA/NAFTA country" of the most frequent occurrence. This indicates that the North American Free Trade Agreement between the US, Canada, and Mexico, and then the USMCA, were imposed. 10 times of "the amount of (any) customs duties paid or owed on the materials/goods on importation" presented the second most frequent collocation.

4.2 Verb-Noun Collocations

Verb-noun collocations in the act include "impose duties," "conduct investigations," and grant permission". These collocations depict legal actions and governmental authority. For example, "impose duties" specifies the state's act of levying taxes on specific goods, while "conduct investigations" and "grant permission" outlines the government's power to manage and oversee trade activities. Verb-noun collocations endow legal provisions with dynamism, illustrating the exercise of legal authority and the implementation of legal norms. They help clarify the subjects, objects, and scope of legal actions, enabling readers to grasp the operational mechanisms of legal rules.

As shown in Table 2, the frequencies of "imposed", "conduct" "grant" are 123, 49, and 16, respectively. From the perspective of verb-noun collocation, "imposed" was collocated with nouns like "tax, duty, fee, and penalty." While "conduct" collocates with "investigations, study, review, and examination." "Grant" collocates with "permission, subsidy, or funds."

Table 2. Collocation of "imposed" "conduct" "grant"

Token	Frequency	Left context	Right context
imposed	123	tax/duty/fee/penalty...	under/by/upon...
conduct	49	shall/negligent...	investigations/study/examination...
grant	16	shall/may/or...	permission/subsidy/funds...

4.3 Adjective-Noun Collocations

Adjective-noun collocations such as "preferential treatment," "prohibited merchandise," and "administrative authority" are also prominent in the act. These collocations endow legal concepts with specific attributes and value judgments. "Preferential treatment" indicates tariff exemptions or reductions granted to certain goods or countries, reflecting trade policies and diplomatic considerations. "Prohibited merchandise" encompasses items banned from import or export due to health, safety, or moral concerns, delineating the boundaries of legal regulation. Adjective-noun collocations enrich the semantic dimensions of legal language, enhancing the normative and directive nature of legal texts.

As shown in Table 3, the frequencies of "administrative authority," "foreign trade," and "additional duties" are 847, 58, and 9, respectively. From the perspective of adjective-noun collocation, "preferential" was collocated with nouns like "tariff, customs, and treatment." While "prohibited" collocates with "merchandise or allowance." "Administrative" collocates with "Act or determination."

Table 3. Collocation of "preferential," "prohibited," "administrative," and "additional duties," "foreign trade"

Token	Frequency	Left context	Right context
preferential	28	of/for...	tariff/customs/treatment...
prohibited	58	is/not...	merchandise/allowance...
administrative	128	customs/other...	Act/determination...
administrative authority	847	the	concludes/reviews/shall...
foreign trade	58	a/any...	Agreement/zone
additional duties	9	of/or...	under/taxes...

4.4 Other Collocation Types

In addition to the aforementioned types, the Tariff Act of 1930 features adverb-verb collocations like "efficiently regulate" and "cumulatively assess," as well as prepositional phrase collocations such as "in accordance with regulations" and "for the purpose of." These collocations serve to refine legal expressions and emphasize legislative intent. "Efficiently regulate" underscores the rigor and intensity of legal oversight, while "cumulatively assess" highlights the principle of fairness in tariff evaluations. Prepositional phrase collocations provide contextual conditions and purposes for legal provisions, clarifying the applicability and limitations of legal rules.

As in Table 4, "in accordance with regulations" occurred 24 times, and "for the purpose of" 39 times, while other adverb-verb collocations such as "cumulatively assess" occurred 9 times, "promptly assess" 1 time.

Table 4. Collocation of "assess," "regulations," and "purpose"

Token	Frequency	Left context	Right context
assess	25	cumulatively /promptly...	duties/penalty/initiatives...
regulations	370	rules and/such...	
regulations	24	in accordance with	prescribed/referred to...
purpose	81	the	of/out/such...
for the purpose of	39	examine/conducted...	directing/ascertaining...

5. The Role of Collocation Patterns in the Interpretation of Legal Provisions

5.1 Clarifying Ambiguities

Legal texts may contain words with multiple meanings, but collocation patterns can resolve ambiguities. For instance, the term "duties" can refer to "taxes" or "obligations." However, in the collocation "customs duties," "duties" unambiguously denotes taxes levied on imported or exported goods. Similarly, "prohibited goods" clearly refers to items banned from trade, rather than goods that are merely restricted. Collocation patterns provide semantic constraints, narrowing the range of lexical meanings and guiding interpreters toward the intended legal meaning.

5.2 Revealing Legislative Intent

Collocation patterns reflect legislative intent and policy orientation. For example, collocations like "protect domestic industries" and "promote economic recovery" reveal the protectionist stance of the Tariff Act of 1930. By analyzing these collocations, interpreters can better grasp the legislative purpose behind the text, ensuring that interpretations align with the overarching goals of the law. This prevents oversimplified or literal interpretations that might deviate from legislative intent.

5.3 Ensuring Consistency in Interpretation

Stable collocation patterns in legal provisions help maintain interpretive consistency. When similar collocations recur across different sections of the Tariff Act of 1930, they signal uniform legal concepts and rules. For instance, the consistent use of "tariff rates" and "customs valuation" ensures that related provisions are interpreted cohesively. This consistency strengthens the integrity of the legal system and enhances the predictability of legal applications, fostering trust in legal norms.

5.4 Assisting Judicial Precedents and Legal Arguments

In judicial practice, collocation patterns provide judges and lawyers with linguistic evidence for legal reasoning. For example, when interpreting the scope of "imported goods," reference can be made to collocations like "goods subject to tariffs" and "goods crossing national borders." These patterns clarify the boundaries of "imported goods," supporting judicial decisions and legal arguments. By anchoring legal interpretations in collocation patterns, judicial rulings gain stronger persuasiveness and authority.

6. Case Studies and Practical Implications

6.1 Selected Case Studies

Several landmark cases involving the Tariff Act of 1930 illustrate the role of collocation patterns in legal interpretation. In the case of *Isuzu North America Corporation v. Progressive Metal Manufacturing Company* in 2021, which is an automotive supply chain dispute. Plaintiff Isuzu North America Corporation and Defendant Progressive Metal Manufacturing Company are parties to annual purchase orders under which Defendant must manufacture certain custom-made brackets, clips, and spacers (“the component parts”) in such quantities and at such times as needed to meet Plaintiff’s requirements for the given year. On June 30, 2021, Defendant sent Plaintiff a “Notice of Force Majeure” letter stating it is unable to produce all of the component parts under the contract due to a labor shortage. The Plaintiff filed its verified complaint alleging breach of contract against the Defendant in this Court on October 6, 2021. (ECF No. 1.) The matter is now before the Court on Plaintiff’s motion for temporary restraining order and preliminary injunction. (ECF No. 5.) Plaintiff states it has not been able to identify a new supplier for the component parts until at least December 22 and that any disruptions in the weekly shipments of the component parts threaten to shut down its assembly lines. Plaintiff seeks an order requiring Defendant to continue to produce and ship the component parts in accordance with Plaintiff’s build-out schedule pending a hearing on the merits of Plaintiff’s claims. Defendant opposes the motion. (ECF Nos. 15, 16.) The plaintiff has filed a reply. (ECF No. 17.) The parties appeared before the Court on October 14, 2021, and October 18, 2021. For the reasons stated on the record at the October 18 hearing, the Court GRANTS IN PART Plaintiffs’ motion for a temporary restraining order as follows:

IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that Defendant shall continue to produce and ship the component parts in accordance with the schedule referenced by Plaintiffs’ counsel at the hearing, which constitutes approximately 50% of Defendant’s contractual obligations (attached as Exhibit A) through November 17, 2021;

“It appears there is a discrepancy between the schedule referenced during the hearing and the schedule provided to the Court by Plaintiff’s counsel with regard to the amount of the part ending in 2030 (on page 7 of the chart) that will be needed following week 45. Because Defendant has a sufficient number of this **part** during the time period subject to this order, the Court need not resolve this issue.”

The court faced challenges in defining “automobile parts.” By analyzing collocations such as “component parts” and “assembled vehicles,” the court clarified the relationship between parts and finished products, ultimately determining that the disputed items fell within the tariff classification for automobile parts. This case highlights how collocation analysis aids judges in resolving ambiguities and making informed decisions.

6.2 Implications for Legal Practice and Education

For legal practice, this study emphasizes the importance of collocation analysis in legal interpretation. Legal professionals should pay attention to collocation patterns in legal texts to improve the accuracy and reliability of interpretations. In legal education, courses on legal language should incorporate collocation analysis training, helping students understand the linguistic features of legal texts and enhancing their legal reasoning skills. This equips future legal practitioners with essential tools for navigating complex legal language.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Findings

This paper systematically analyzes the collocation patterns in the Tariff Act of 1930, identifying prevalent noun-noun, verb-noun, and adjective-noun collocations. These patterns are integral to expressing legal concepts and legislative intent. Furthermore, the study demonstrates the critical role of collocation patterns in legal provision interpretation, including ambiguity resolution, legislative intent revelation, consistency maintenance, and support for judicial reasoning. Collocation analysis provides a novel and effective method for legal hermeneutics.

7.2 Contributions and Limitations

This study bridges corpus linguistics and legal linguistics, offering fresh insights into the linguistic analysis of legal texts. It enriches the methodology of legal interpretation and provides empirical evidence for understanding the

language of the Tariff Act of 1930. However, limitations exist, such as the relatively small corpus size and potential biases in collocation extraction methods. Additionally, the analysis of collocation patterns could be further deepened to uncover more nuanced linguistic features.

7.3 Future Research Directions

Future research could expand the corpus to include more U.S. trade laws and regulations for comparative analysis of collocation patterns. This would reveal the general and unique linguistic characteristics of U.S. trade legal texts. Furthermore, integrating theories from cognitive linguistics could explore the cognitive mechanisms underlying legal collocations, offering a deeper understanding of their formation and interpretation. These directions would further enhance the application of corpus linguistics in legal studies.

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