

Disseminating legal information on online law forums in English and Italian

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Abstract:

The advent of the Internet has had a significant impact on the transfer of specialised knowledge from experts to non-experts. Over the years, the way in which digital tools such as blogs, forums and websites have been conveying information has had a strong impact on people's understanding of specialised knowledge: popularisation thus functions as a tool for the "empowerment" of the lay people (Bondi et al., 2019, p. 2). The focus of the present paper is on legal knowledge communication from expert to non-expert online from a cross-cultural perspective. The aim is to investigate the linguistic-discursive strategies deployed by English and Italian law professionals providing legal advice to lay people on online law forums. The contribution of online law forums to legal knowledge dissemination has received scholarly attention in English. Relevant research across languages is still lacking. This paper attempts to help fill this gap, by illustrating and comparing the ways legal information is given on the UK *LegalExpert* and Italian *La Legge per Tutti* forums. Adopting a discourse analytical approach, the analysis shows that both British and Italian legal experts give advice using a variety of strategies, ranging from impersonal explanatory to interpersonal and communicative practices. The paper attempts to provide further insights into effective computer-mediated legal discourse for legal professionals and language scholars alike.

Keywords: online law forum, legal communication, expert-layperson interaction, knowledge dissemination strategies, cross-linguistic (English and Italian)

Resumen:

La divulgación de información jurídica en foros de derecho online en inglés e italiano

La llegada de Internet ha tenido un impacto significativo en la transferencia de conocimiento especializado de expertos a no expertos. A lo largo de los años, la forma en la que herramientas digitales como blogs, foros y páginas web han transmitido la información ha tenido un gran impacto en la gente y en la comprensión del conocimiento especializado: la popularización por tanto funciona como una herramienta que empodera a los ciudadanos (Bondi et al., 2019). Este artículo se centra en la comunicación de información jurídica de expertos a no-expertos desde una perspectiva intercultural. Tiene como objetivo investigar las estrategias lingüístico-discursivas empleadas por profesionales del derecho ingleses e italianos que ofrecen asesoramiento legal a personas no especializadas en foros de derecho online. Este tema ha recibido mucha atención académica en inglés, pero todavía se necesita más investigación relevante en otros idiomas. Este artículo intenta ayudar a llenar este vacío, ilustrando y comparando las formas en que se proporciona información legal en los foros *LegalExpert* del Reino Unido y *La Legge per Tutti* en Italia. Adoptando un enfoque analítico del discurso, el análisis muestra que tanto los expertos británicos como italianos brindan asesoramiento utilizando una variedad de estrategias que van desde las explicaciones impersonales hasta las prácticas interpersonales y comunicativas. Este estudio ofrece información reveladora para hacer que el discurso legal online sea más efectivo tanto para profesionales del derecho como lingüistas.

Palabras clave: foros jurídicos online, comunicación jurídica, interacción entre expertos y no expertos, estrategias de disseminación de conocimiento, comunicación cross-lingüística (inglés e italiano)

1. Introduction

The advent of the Internet has had as a consequence an evolution of communication processes. Millions and millions of people from all over the world are able to communicate and exchange information thanks to a wider range of tools existing on the net (e.g., blogs, forums, social networking sites). The Web has in fact played a major role in expanding access to knowledge and providing tools for knowledge communication and knowledge dissemination (Bondi & Cacchiani, 2021). Over the years, the way in which such digital tools have been conveying information has had a strong impact on people's understanding of specialised knowledge: popularisation thus functions as a tool for the "empowerment" of the lay people (Bondi et al., 2019, p. 2). As discussed in the literature, the spread of digital technologies has greatly contributed to "the generation of new discourse

practices, which, in turn can affect (specialized) communication profoundly” (Anesa & Kulbicki, 2022, p. 5).

The present study is located within the framework of legal communication that Engberg (2022) defines as an “example of communication that creates legal knowledge especially through communicative interactions involving legal experts” (p. 75). More specifically, the focus of the paper is on legal knowledge communication from expert to non-expert on online law forums.

Within the legal field, Lanctot (1999) found that “lawyers have begun to use the medium of cyberspace to give specific legal advice to laypeople who request it” (p. 151). In his study on free legal advice on the Internet, Maggs (2006), for example, illustrated how online discussion forums represent a “new and rapidly growing method of providing legal advice”, in which “ordinary people pose specific legal questions and both ordinary people and lawyers answer them” (p. 483). Legal blogging also plays a significant role for lawyers who write them and “show a creative voice and distinctive personality, different from the client-driven stylistic practices of traditional legal writing” (Murphy Romig, 2015, p. 30). This view supports Davis’ (2020) claim that the digital public sphere is the way lawyers, who have a professional responsibility as citizen lawyers, are most likely to reach lay audiences and are encouraged to make public commentary, and think more deeply, about how arguments are constructed.

Over the last decade, growing scholarly interest has been shown in the study of web-mediated legal communication from a linguistic perspective. Garzone (2014) explored the personal individualistic dimension of law blogs or “blawgs”, and likewise, Tessuto (2015) investigated legal blogs as sites “for stance and engagement” (p. 85). Diani (2021, 2022) highlighted the argumentative dimension of law blogs and their dialogic function in post-comment threads. Attention has also been devoted to the importance assumed by law blogs as a tool for communicating legal issues with “the wider audience” of non-experts. Solly (2012) examined a legal blog, *BabyBarista*, published first by *The Times* and then by *The Guardian* as “a fictional account of a junior barrister practising at the English Bar” (p. 52). Anesa (2018) discussed the “democratization of knowledge” by focusing on blawgs concerning environmental issues.

The contribution of online law forums to legal knowledge communication has also received scholarly attention in English. Anesa (2016), for example, looked at the peculiarities of expert-lay interaction in a corpus of threads

drawn from the US *Justanswer* law forum. Turnbull (2018a, 2018b) analysed UK law forums dealing with Family Law and identified the strategies adopted to re-contextualise legal information and communicate with lay people. Similarly, Boginskaya (2021) studied the popularisation strategies used by lawyers in the *ExpertLaw* forum. Doerr (2020) focused on legal advice and dissemination in a particularly specialised area of legal practice, i.e., American military law, by analysing online military lawyer forums. These previous studies have investigated knowledge dissemination strategies in English law forums but, to the best of our knowledge, few scholars have applied such insights to different languages and cultures, and only focused on the contribution of blogs to legal popularised communication in Spanish (see Pontrandolfo, 2017; Pontrandolfo & Piccioni, 2018; Jiménez-Yáñez et al., 2020). This paper attempts to help fill this gap, by exploring the linguistic-discursive strategies deployed by English and Italian law professionals providing legal advice to laypeople on online law forums.

It is well-established that in any specialised domain there is a strong knowledge asymmetry between experts and non-experts. As Turnbull (2018a) pointed out, in the legal field “the syntactic complexity, highly specific vocabulary and specialized register of its language, as well as the technical content and procedural knowledge of the discipline, accentuate this gap” (p. 201). The transfer of specialised knowledge, therefore, is a complex process involving not only a reformulation of specialised knowledge, but also a “recontextualisation” of scientific knowledge originally produced in specific contexts to which the lay public has limited access (Calsamiglia & van Dijk, 2004, p. 372).

Drawing on the research strands outlined so far, two main research questions are explored in this study: (1) how digital communication has shaped the ways law professionals disseminate information to wider audiences on law forums, and (2) which strategies for knowledge dissemination are employed in British and Italian law forums.

The next section provides a presentation of the corpora used for the study as well as the methodological approach. Subsequently, section 3 examines the approaches used to communicate legal information on the UK *LegalExpert* and Italian *La Legge per Tutti* forums. The study compares the strategies used on these forums with those identified in previous studies of popularisation of legal information in online communication (e.g., Anesa, 2016; Turnbull, 2018a, 2018b) with the aim of observing whether similar linguistic

approaches are evident in the data under investigation. The paper ends with some concluding remarks (section 4).

2. Corpus and Method

2.1. Corpus

The study is based on the analysis of two comparable English and Italian corpora of post-comment threads taken from Q&A sessions of online law forums, selected over a five-year period, from 2018 to 2022. The criteria adopted to choose the law forums include:

- they need to be registered in the web under a UK or an Italian domain
- their consultation is free of charge and registration to them is not required
- answers within the Q&A session are to be provided by experts, mainly solicitors or at least by staff members
- Q&A sessions should cover a variety of issues to allow generalisation of results
- they provide the number of views each thread receives, which gives an idea of how popular the threads have been

Two websites offering free legal advice through forums have been selected for this study, namely the British *LegalExpert.co.uk*¹ and the Italian *La Legge per Tutti*².

LegalExpert.co.uk is a British professional website that has been developed by a legal practice offering free legal advice, as stated in the homepage: “We can give you legal advice & guidance. We are experts in the legal world and we can offer free specialist advice”. The forum covers legal issues such as personal injury (including car accidents, accidents at work, slip trip fall accidents, cycle accidents, taxi accidents, bus accidents, accidents in a public place, road accidents, pedestrian accidents), medical negligence, and sexual abuse. Each of these areas covers a range of different legal issues, with each including a Q&A session in which a user posts his/her question and an answer is provided by a law professional. The number of post-comment threads in the Q&A session varies from two up to as many as sixty-seven. For the present study 163 threads, each consisting of one post and one

comment/reply (approximately 35,000 words), were selected applying the following criteria: time span (five-year period, from 2018 to 2022); Q&A sessions that were made up of at least five threads, displaying the interactivity of the forum.

La Legge per Tutti is an Italian professional website offering legal advice by Italian lawyers, as stated in the homepage: “il più grande e innovativo network di avvocati italiani, il primo a fornire consulenze legali e tributarie online al cittadino e alle aziende” [The largest and most innovative network of Italian lawyers, the first to give online legal and tax advice to individuals and businesses]. The website hosts a forum providing for a wide range of matters ranging from, among others, ambiente [environment], diritto d'autore [copyright issues], crimini / frodi [crimes / frauds], debiti / banche [debts / banks], vittime della strada [road victims], to fisco [taxes], lavoro / aziende [job / enterprises], tribunali e giustizia [law courts and justice]. Each of the above-mentioned legal areas comprises a session called “Discussione”, in which users post their questions that are answered by law professionals. The number of threads in each session varies from two up to as many as fifty-one. The same criteria applied to the creation of the British corpus were used to select the Italian threads. I chose the sessions including at least five threads, with one post and one reply by a lawyer, over a five-year period, from 2018 to 2022. The data collected consists of 215 threads, amounting to approximately 79,400 words.

In both the British *LeggExpert* and Italian *La Legge per Tutti* forums the communicative exchange, exemplified through the post-comment thread, primarily takes place between the user posting his/her message and asking for advice and the law professional as an expert providing informative support through a comment as a reply to the user's question. For each post there is a header with a subject line by the user that indicates what the message is about. This may be in the form of keywords (e.g., “Enquiring - not an accident but injured”; “Accident on bus at work”; “Lavaggio auto privata in strada” [private car street washing]; “Acquisto tra privati tramite sito di annunci” [Purchase between private individuals through classified websites]), or sentences, mainly questions (e.g., “Can I claim back wages as loss of earnings if I am injured in a trip and fall accident at work?”; “How are personal injury claims calculated?”; “Può il datore di lavoro mettere in busta paga giorni di ferie che non ho fatto?” [Can the employer put days off that I did not take in my paycheck?]).

As regards the status information of interlocutors, in the British forum the names of both users and experts are generally anonymous, and no information is provided in terms of the status of experts answering the questions, whose professional identity is solely indicated with labels, such as “First name-Expert-Lawyer”, “(Staff) Member” or similar. In contrast, the qualification and name of the legal experts involved in the Italian *La Legge per Tutti* forum are often present (e.g., Avv. Nome Cognome), while the users tend to be anonymous (only 11 users reveal their identity). This may reflect the nature of the legal forum itself as a virtual space promoting anonymous interaction (Turnbull, 2018b).

2.2. Method

The analysis of the threads has been carried out adopting the theoretical framework suggested by Anesa (2016) and Turnbull (2018a, 2018b) in their law forum studies to investigate how legal information is transferred. Their framework draws on seminal works by Ciapuscio (2003), Gülich (2003), and Calsamiglia and van Dijk (2004), in classifying cognitive and communicative strategies in expert to non-expert communication.

Anesa’s (2016) and Turnbull’s (2018a, 2018b) point of departure for the analysis of popularising strategies include Calsamiglia and van Dijk’s (2004, pp. 372-384) classification of forms of explanation:

- *Denomination* or *designation*, which consists in introducing new terms
- *Definition*, which involves the explanation of unknown terms
- *Reformulation* or *paraphrase*, which rephrases a given meaning by replicating a given meaning in parentheses or between dashes, or by reformulating it in the form of a quote or a metalinguistic expression (e.g., *are called*)
- *Generalisation*, which draws general conclusions from specific examples or cases
- *Exemplification*, which provides specific instantiations of general phenomena
- *Scenario*, which consists in illustrating possible or hypothetical situations, more complex events, or reactions, and taking into consideration a broader context, to refer to the specific situation

Intertextuality is another strategy, though not an explicit form of explanation, as suggested by Anesa (2016), which serves as a tool to further explain

specific concepts or procedures. Hyperlinks to further sources are often present in online forums to orient users towards searching and obtaining more detailed information.

Turnbull (2018b) identified further communicative strategies such as *narrative* and *personalisation*. According to her, *narrative* may act as an account in which experts use narrations, either impersonally or personally, to explain in more practical terms why a specific solution is the most appropriate. In other words, experts disseminate information to users transforming experience into new knowledge that serves as a tool to provide legal advice. As regards *personalisation*, Turnbull (2018b) explains why such a strategy is effective:

Advice given through personalization and 1st person narratives is perhaps more acceptable and convincing as their ‘soul-baring’ and ‘confessional mode’ creates solidarity and empathy (Giannoni 2008: 224). [...] Personalization by professionals seems to reinforce their authority, as they are always ready to step in to correct wrong information where necessary, thus guaranteeing the validity of the legal advice. (p. 431)

With this description in mind, I will explore whether these knowledge dissemination strategies are also present in the British and Italian online law forums under investigation when legal information is acquired from them. For the purpose of this study only the responses by the law professionals to the users’ original posts have been analysed in order to see how legal information is given. Due to the small size of the two corpora, the identification of the strategies described above was carried out through a manual analysis based on a close reading of the lawyers’ responses. In this regard, special attention was devoted to the search for “explanatory structures” as Anesa (2016) calls them (i.e., denominations, definitions, descriptions, reformulations, paraphrases, exemplifications, and generalisations). To this aim, the corpora were only investigated from a qualitative perspective.

3. Results

This section provides the results emerging from the analysis of the two corpora from a cross-linguistic perspective. All the examples have been reported in their original form as found in the data regardless of syntactical errors or linguistic inaccuracies. The names of the expert and the user have been removed for a question of privacy.

3.1. The British *Legal Expert* forum

When legal information is transferred in the forum, law professionals tend to make an extensive use of explanatory strategies. However, interactive and dialogic strategies are also observed. Among the explanatory structures, denomination, definition, description, exemplification, and scenario are the most commonly used.

Denominations are employed using predominantly expressions such as *is known as* or *is called*, as the following excerpts show:

- (1) Under personal injury law, various parties have an obligation to uphold the health, safety and wellbeing of others so far as it is reasonably possible for them to do so. *This is known as* a duty of care. (“Can somebody tell me what duty of care means?”, <https://forum.legalexpert.co.uk/threads/can-somebody-tell-me-what-duty-of-care-means.880/> — 24 Nov, 2020)
- (2) The other part of a claim *is called* special damages. *This relates to* financial losses you may have sustained, like your replacement car and getting your own car fixed. (“How are personal injury claims calculated?”, <https://forum.legalexpert.co.uk/threads/how-are-personal-injury-claims-calculated.884/> — 27 Nov, 2020)

Example (2) also provides description, introduced by *this relates to*, whose function is to describe the notion of *special damage*, and exemplification, *like your replacement car and getting your own car fixed*.

Definitions are often present, signalled by phrases such as *means that*, as in (3), or simple auxiliary sentences with the verb *to be*, as in (4).

- (3) A limitation period *means that* there is a set period of time by which a Claimant (you) should have “brought” their claim to court. (“Can I claim back wages as loss of earnings if I am injured in a trip and fall accident at work?”, <https://forum.legalexpert.co.uk/threads/can-i-claim-back-wages-as-loss-of-earnings-if-i-am-injured-in-a-trip-and-fall-accident-at-work.368/> — 28 Feb, 2018)
- (4) Let me tell you what a *No Win No Fee agreement* is first and then a little about how we can help you. *A No Win No Fee agreement, which is also referred to as a Conditional Fee Agreement (CFA), is* the contract between you and your personal injury solicitor. (“What is a no win no fee agreement?”, <https://forum.legalexpert.co.uk/threads/what-is-a-no-win-no-fee-agreement.879/> — 24 Nov, 2020)

Solicitors also make use of exemplifications to make it clearer, e.g., procedures, information, or particular data required to proceed with a specific phase of a legal action, and are often introduced by *such as* (5) or *for example* (6).

- (5) If you give them an explanation of what happened and any details from the insurance *such as* a reference number/your friends registration number they'll be able to submit a claim for you. ("I need legal representation", <https://forum.legalexpert.co.uk/threads/i-need-legal-representation.937/> — 28 Jan, 2022)
- (6) If you were to make a claim it would most likely be against the property/flat block owner. So *for example* if it's owned and maintained by your local council chances are they're in charge of maintaining the bike storage too so the claim would be against them. ("Injury advice please", <https://forum.legalexpert.co.uk/threads/injury-advice-please.941/> — 3 Feb, 2022)

Exemplifications may serve as an illustration of the situation in which users asking for advice can be involved. They give general reference to a broader context and possible situations, and offer a solution that fits the case. The following excerpt exemplifies such a strategy.

- (7) To answer your question, yes you can make a claim as a passenger. *There are two circumstances* in which you can claim as a passenger, and you fall into one of them:
- If the driver of the vehicle you were in caused the accident, you could make a claim against their insurance.
 - Or if the driver of another vehicle caused a crash involving the vehicle you were in, you can also make a claim but against that driver's insurance.

It sounds as if you'd fall into the first option. ("Can I make a claim as a passenger?", <https://forum.legalexpert.co.uk/threads/can-i-make-a-claim-as-a-passenger.886/> — 1 Dec, 2020)

As we can see, the law professional provides support first by illustrating two circumstances that allow the claim request, and then by identifying the one in which the user is involved (*It sounds as if you'd fall into the first option*).

Reformulations are also widely used by legal experts to re-explain more specialised notions or concepts. They are mainly realised in the corpus by

means of linguistic markers such as *in other words*, as the following excerpt illustrates:

- (8) You are also entitled to claim financial losses such as treatment costs that flow from the Defendant’s negligence in driving into the back of your car. *In other words*, but for their negligence you would not have needed the treatment so you are entitled to claim those costs in addition to the claim for personal injury compensation. (“I had a car accident that was not my fault while driving a taxi, will claiming affect my job?”, <https://forum.legalexpert.co.uk/threads/i-had-a-car-accident-that-was-not-my-fault-while-driving-a-taxi-will-claiming-affect-my-job.395/> — 8 Mar, 2019)

In addition to these explanatory structures, interestingly, law professionals also adopt dialogic/interactive strategies to disseminate their legal knowledge. For example, as observed by Anesa (2016), they may pose questions to the users for further details, to compensate for a lack of data required to offer their expertise to them. The following excerpt exemplifies this particular strategy that may be partly attributed to the public, informative, and educational nature of the information provided to web users of the forum itself (Anesa, 2016).

- (9) Hi Dayere. If you are looking to make a claim for this we would need to know how the cut happened. *Was there any fault with the machinery or any PPE provided? Has your hand just slipped and caught the machine? What training have you received etc.* We only say this as these things would be considered when applying to make a claim to make sure we can hold your employer at fault for the injury. (“Machinery injury”, <https://forum.legalexpert.co.uk/threads/machinery-injury.988/> — 30 Mar, 2022)

Although the analysis of the language of the experts’ responses lies beyond the scope of the present paper, it is nevertheless important to point out that most of the legal experts use a high level of formality and politeness. For example, their replies often open with an expression of thanks followed by a formulaic expression such as *I am pleased to advise that*, as in (10), or close with a formal sentence encouraging users to contact them, *Should you have any questions, please contact us*, as in (11), and demonstrate effective support, *We would be happy to assist!*

- (10) *Thank you for your enquiry. I am pleased to advise that* based on the accident circumstances, you would be entitled to make a claim for compensation

against the other offending driver. (“How long does it take to claim compensation for a taxi accident?”, <https://forum.legalexpert.co.uk/threads/how-long-does-it-take-to-claim-compensation-for-a-taxi-accident.740/> — 5 Jun, 2019)

- (11) *Should you have any questions, please contact us* on our online chat, or call our free number (0800 073 8804). We deal with many claims similar to this, and *would be happy to assist!* (“How much compensation can I receive for stitches on my finger from a work related injury?”, <https://forum.legalexpert.co.uk/threads/how-much-compensation-can-i-receive-for-stitches-on-my-finger-from-a-work-related-injury.399/> — 8 Mar, 2019)

However, an informal tone of the solicitors’ answers is observable in the way they begin with the salutation, in most cases, *Hi + name*, as in (9) above or, at times, *Hi then*. Another notable feature contributing to an informal tone is the expressions of empathy they as advice-givers show toward the user’s message (Morrow, 2006). In some of their replies, an empathetic stance serves as an opener, to manifest solidarity with the user’s experience, as the following excerpt shows:

- (12) *I am sorry to read of what I am sure must have been a traumatic event.* This must have had a huge impact on your day to day life. (“Can I claim compensation for a work related injury from the gym if I am a personal trainer?”, <https://forum.legalexpert.co.uk/threads/can-i-claim-compensation-for-a-work-related-injury-from-the-gym-if-i-am-a-personal-trainer.391/> — 28 Feb, 2019)

Alternatively, it functions as a closing, when ending the message saying *Hope you feel better soon*.

Empathy is also displayed by law professionals when they express their desire to be understood by conveying clear information.

- (13) *I hope this has answered your question,* and if you have any more, please don’t hesitate to ask! (“Can I make a claim as a passenger?”, <https://forum.legalexpert.co.uk/threads/can-i-make-a-claim-as-a-passenger.886/> — 1 Dec, 2020)

Even if the professionals provide answers, users are advised to access the website where they can have access to more information, as shown in (14). This may be intended as intertextual reference, “as a tool which contributes to the explanation of certain concepts and procedures” (Anesa, 2016, p. 81).

- (14) I hope that's cleared things up for you. If you happen to have been involved in an accident at work, Legal Expert is here to help you. We can answer more questions like this for you and connect you to one of our specialist solicitors who can try and win you compensation. You can message our live chat team via the box bottom right—they could even give you a No Win No Fee bonus code. *You can also click here to find out more.* (“Can somebody tell me what duty of care means?”, <https://forum.legalexpert.co.uk/threads/can-somebody-tell-me-what-duty-of-care-means.880/> — 24 Nov, 2020)

Intertextual references may also be made to legal documents that law professionals quote in their comments and provide access by clicking on them:

- (15) In cases involving an accident at work, an employer would owe you a duty of care under the *Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974*. Cases involving employers are often referred to as employers' liability claims. If you happened to be injured in a public place, the party in control of that area has a duty of care under the *Occupiers' Liability Act 1954*. Cases of this nature are referred to as public liability claims. When driving or using roads as a pedestrian or cyclist, other road users owe us a duty of care under the *Highway Code*. A breach of this duty of care may lead to a road traffic accident. (“Can somebody tell me what duty of care means?”, <https://forum.legalexpert.co.uk/threads/can-somebody-tell-me-what-duty-of-care-means.880/> — 24 Nov, 2020)

Overall, the analysis shows that the British solicitors balance the use of impersonal explanatory strategies with more interpersonal and communicative strategies. Through them, the legal information they communicate in the form of advice may be manifested:

a) directly, i.e., with clear instructions to follow, as in (16), where imperatives are used to impart the advice as a set of procedural steps to be taken by the user (Turnbull, 2018b):

- (16) Once you have your evidence, we recommend that you seek legal advice. *Present* your evidence to the solicitor, *tell* them what happened in as much detail as you can recall and the impact the injuries have had on your life. (“How do I make a claim for workers compensation?”, <https://forum.legalexpert.co.uk/threads/how-do-i-make-a-claim-for-workers-compensation.878/> — 24 Nov, 2020)

b) less directly, e.g., through the use of conditional clauses (17), forms of modality (18), as the following excerpts show:

- (17) Not all insurance policies are covered for injury so it may be best to check your documents first. *If this is the case you would need to find a solicitor to take on a personal injury claim for you.* (“Looking for advice on accident”, <https://forum.legalexpert.co.uk/threads/looking-for-advice-on-accident.967/> — 3 Mar, 2022)
- (18) *If you know* the dogs owner and have their details/ or you have reported it to the police *you may be able to make a claim* for the injury from the dog bite depending on if the dog is insured or not. (“Dog bite advice”, <https://forum.legalexpert.co.uk/threads/dog-bite-advice.996/> — 14 Apr, 2022)

3.2. The Italian *La Legge per Tutti* forum

Like the British legal experts, Italian law professionals explain legal information through a series of strategies. The main ones emerging in their responses are denomination, reformulation, and scenario. For example, in (19) the expert denominates the type of offense (*reato di disturbo delle occupazioni o del riposo delle persone* [the crime of disturbing the occupations or rest of people]) potentially committed by owners of dogs which bark continuously disturbing public quiet to let users decide whether to proceed with legal action against owners.

- (19) L’abbaire continuo dei cani che dia molestia a più persone fa *incorrere* il proprietario/custode *nel reato di disturbo delle occupazioni o del riposo delle persone (art. 659 c.p.)*. Il proprietario può quindi essere denunciato. E’ possibile agire anche in sede civile ai sensi dell’art. 844 c.c., se i latrati provocano un’immissione rumorosa intollerabile: il giudice potrebbe condannare il proprietario al risarcimento e a prendere ogni provvedimento necessario affinché l’episodio non si ripeta.

Avv. [Nome e Cognome] (“Cane del vicino che abbaia”, <https://forum.laleggepertutti.it/Thread-Cane-del-vicino-che-abbaia> — 5 Jun, 2020)

[The continuous barking of dogs that harasses several people causes the owner/keeper *to commit the crime of disturbing the occupations or rest of people (art. 659 c. p.)*. The owner can then be reported. It is also possible to act in civil proceedings pursuant to Article 844 of the Italian Civil Code, if the barks cause an intolerable noise: the judge can order the owner to

pay compensation and to take all necessary measures so that the episode does not happen again.

Solicitor [Name and Surname]]

The following excerpt (20) is an example of reformulation—that is signalled by the phrase *in poche parole* [simply put] that facilitates users through a quicker reading of more complex legal information—and scenario (*nel Suo caso* [in your case]), as a way of concretising and contextualising legal information (Turnbull, 2018b).

- (20) *In poche parole*, dipende dal tipo di contrasto tra motivazione e dispositivo: *se è evidente* che l'errore all'interno del dispositivo sia una mera svista, allora deve ritenersi prevalente la decisione. *Nel Suo caso* non v'è un vero e proprio contrasto tra motivazione e dispositivo, ma un evidente errore materiale del giudice (una dimenticanza), il quale potrebbe essere corretto mediante l'apposita procedura. (“Confisca scritta prima del P.Q.M. e non ripetuta in P.Q.M”, <https://forum.laleggepertutti.it/Thread-Confisca-scritta-prima-del-P-Q-M-e-non-ripetuta-in-P-Q-M> — 15 Jun, 2020)

[*Simply put*, it depends on the difference between motivation and device: if it is evident that the error inside the device is a mere oversight, then the decision must prevail. *In your case* there is not a real difference between motivation and device, but an obvious error of the judge (a forgetfulness), which could be corrected by an appropriate procedure].

Similar to the British solicitors, Italian legal experts show their expertise providing more precise legal references through intertextuality. While in (19) this is realised at a textual level (*art. 659 c.p., ai sensi dell'art. 844 c.c.*), in (21) it is realised through the use of hyperlinks to the legal resource.

- (21) Gent.mo, per approfondire il tema della perquisizione e dell'ispezione, *La invito a leggere il seguente articolo*: https://www.laleggepertutti.it/176326_qu...perquisire

(“Ispezione finalizzata alla ricerca di sostanze stupefacenti arbitraria”, <https://forum.laleggepertutti.it/Thread-Ispezione-finalizzata-alla-ricerca-di-sostanze-stupefacenti-arbitraria> — 6 Jun, 2020)

[Dear Sir, in order to further your understanding of the topic of search and inspection, *I invite you to read the following article*: https://www.laleggepertutti.it/176326_qu...perquisire]

At times, solicitors may also ask questions if they need further information to provide appropriate and useful responses, as shown in (22).

- (22) *Glielo ha chiesto o glielo ha imposto?* (“Privacy a scuola”, <https://forum.laleggepertutti.it/Thread-Privacy-a-scuola> — 22 Apr, 2021)

[*Did they ask or decide for you?*]

Considering the style of the Italian legal experts’ responses, I have noted that they mostly use formal and polite forms of address such as *Gentile utente/Egregio signore* [Dear user/sir], *Gentilissimo* [Dearest], salutations and signature, *Cordiali saluti, Adv.* [Nome e Cognome] Kind regards, Solicitor [Name and Surname], and the *Lei* form, as the standard polite address to be used in a formal context, as the professional forum under investigation exemplifies (see example 23).

- (23) *Lei* ha diritto ad ottenere il rimborso della parte di abbonamento di cui non ha usufruito per causa di forza maggiore. (“Palestra non fa recuperare i giorni persi durante la quarantena”, <https://forum.laleggepertutti.it/Thread-Palestra-non-fa-recuperare-i-giorni-persi-durante-la-quarantena> — 29 May, 2020)

[You are entitled to reimbursement for the subscription you did not use due to force majeure.]

However, in seven replies written by different lawyers, they address the users by informal *Tu* instead of *Lei*, as in (24). This creates a conversational style that reduces distance “to breach the expert/non expert barrier” (Scotto di Carlo, 2014, p. 201) and constructs proximity, as Luzón (2013) observed in research blogs.

- (24) *Fai* richiesta formale alla Agenzia delle Entrate (Direzione Provinciale di riferimento) tramite p.e.c./raccomandata a.r. e *Ti* invito ad andare personalmente a sollecitare visti i tempi biblici. (“Contratto locazione originale”, <https://forum.laleggepertutti.it/Thread-Contratto-locazione-originale> — 23 Nov, 2021)

[Make a formal request to the Inland Revenue by e-mail / registered letter. I do invite you to go there so as to solicit such a request.]

This style, however, is uncommon and the tendency is for a formal tone that displays law experts’ professionalism, “while accommodating their discursive

practices towards a lay audience” (Anesa, 2016, p. 83). This is well exemplified in the data, where the legal information Italian law professionals communicate in the form of advice is given in a way that avoids categorical statements but rather offers possible interpretations, through the use of conditional clauses, forms of modality, hedging, as examples (25-27) illustrate. This is because, as Morrow noted (2006, p. 546), “giving advice is a delicate matter and the advice-givers felt constrained to adopt discourse strategies aimed at making the advice giving less threatening to the receivers”.

- (25) Gentile signore, *se ne dovrebbe* occupare l’amministrazione comunale d’intesa con i gestori del traffico ferroviario. *Sarebbe anche utile costituire* un comitato civico che porti avanti la protesta e la sostenga dinanzi alle sedi opportune. (“Transito carri ferroviari in zona residenziale”, <https://forum.laleggepertutti.it/Thread-Transito-carri-ferroviari-in-zona-residenziale> — 17 Jul, 2020)

[Dear Sir, this should be dealt with by the municipal administration together with the rail traffic managers. It would also be useful to set up a citizen’s committee to promote protest and bring it before the appropriate authorities.]

- (26) [...] falsificare una busta paga può costituire reato: di conseguenza, in teoria *potrebbero* esserci gli estremi per una denuncia penale. (“può il datore di lavoro mettere in busta paga giorni di ferie che non ho fatto”, <https://forum.laleggepertutti.it/Thread-puo-il-datore-di-lavoro-mettere-in-busta-paga-giorni-di-ferie-che-non-ho-fatto> — 12 Jul, 2020)

[... forging a pay slip can constitute a criminal offence: consequently, in theory there could be grounds for criminal charges.]

- (27) Dalla lettura del suo messaggio *non mi pare* di ravvisare una critica tale da giustificare una denuncia per diffamazione. (“Recensione negativa veritiera: Cause?”, <https://forum.laleggepertutti.it/Thread-Recensione-negativa-veritiera-Cause> — 21 Feb, 2022)

[Reading your message, it seems to me that such a criticism would not warrant a libel claim.]

4. Concluding remarks

The results of the analysis confirm previous research (e.g., Lanctot, 1999; Anesa, 2016; Anesa & Kulbicki, 2022), highlighting the growing impact of

digital technologies on the practice of law. With more and more individuals turning to the Internet to seek legal guidance, law professionals are increasingly using online platforms to offer their assistance. This is well exemplified in the English and Italian law forums analysed. As the findings demonstrate, English and Italian lawyers as experts dialogue with a lay audience and make their expertise available for the dissemination of a 'public' knowledge. In this sense law forums serve as valuable platforms where users can access legal information tailored to their specific interests and needs (Anesa, 2016).

Since discretion and professionalism are important factors in the legal practice, it becomes vitally important that a lawyer adopts a communicative strategy aiming at meeting the needs of the public and that has nothing to do with promoting him/herself in the strict sense, as much as finding a balance between promotional intent and informative disclosure. As the present study reveals, English and Italian lawyers seem to carefully prepare their replies to be posted so as to take a return in terms of image and reputation. They give legal advice that is relevant and useful to users, by selecting content in relation to the issues, as well as availability towards them (i.e., *I hope this has answered your question, and if you have any more, please don't hesitate to ask!*; *Sono a sua disposizione per ulteriori chiarimenti* [I am at your disposal for further queries]). This finding supports Anesa's (2016) view that, while continuing to promote professionalism, expertise and qualifications, lawyers adapt these traits to offer simplified communication that better suits user needs.

If we consider the strategies for knowledge dissemination employed by British and Italian law professionals, the results show that they both give advice using explanatory structures such as denomination, definition, description, exemplification, reformulation, and scenario. Cross-linguistic differences, however, emerge in the way they frame their advice. Although in the British threads the legal expert uses a high level of formality and politeness, an informal tone is observable in the opening of her/his reply, often covering personal injury issues, which is framed in expressions of empathy s/he as advice-giver shows toward the user's post (i.e., *I am sorry to read of what I am sure must have been a traumatic event. This must have had a huge impact on your day to day life*) or when closing the message saying *Hope you feel better soon*. In contrast, in the Italian data no advice is interspersed with personal comments. This difference may reflect the different personalities of the lawyers or be a deliberate strategy to show professional control.

On the whole, the findings corroborate the general picture emerging from law popularisation literature that recognises an asymmetrical relationship between legal professionals and laypeople in terms of knowledge and power (Anesa, 2016). This is evident in the data analysed, where an asymmetrical relationship between experts and users is maintained. However, in the Italian forum there are examples of responses sometimes creating a symmetrical relationship between them, based on the use of informal *Tu*. This result is more striking than the English forms of informality, because, as Turnbull (2012) rightly observed:

In English the absence of a ‘polite’ form of address makes you unmarked, whereas the use of the Italian *tu* carries implications about the relationship, especially as it can indicate superior/inferior status as well as intimacy. (p. 28)

Using the *Tu* form, therefore, appears to be “a violation of the socially accepted norms of address” (Turnbull, 2012, p. 28) in a professional context as the forum under investigation represents.

However, these results may not be generalised for two reasons. Firstly, the corpora are still limited in terms of size. Secondly, forums have their specific rules in terms of access. Many require registration to access post-comments threads, and thus large amounts of data can be accessed with difficulty. There are also forums where terms and conditions prohibit use for ethical issues. As highlighted by Sugiura et al. (2017), this poses challenges for scholars involved in conducting online research.

Despite these limitations, I think that the present work contributes to the research on popularisation and dissemination of law by shedding light on the recontextualising strategies employed by English and Italian law professionals in legal forums. While previous research has primarily focused on law forums in English, the present work has adopted a comparative analysis of law forums in both English and Italian contexts. This cross-linguistic perspective has highlighted how cultural and linguistic factors shape legal knowledge dissemination online.

The results presented here may have pedagogical implications for law students. Developing awareness and understanding of the processes related to the digitalisation of law in students may help them become familiar with its popularisation in digital genres and media, such as law forums, blogs, websites, social networking sites. Including in law courses activities based on digital practices of law, such as legal advice given over the Internet, may

allow them to keep up with technological innovations that will give more opportunities in their working life.

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Notes

¹ See <https://forum.legalexpert.co.uk/> (last visited: 11th March 2023).

² See <https://forum.laleggepertutti.it/> (last visited: 11th March 2023).