

The Cognitive Processing of Legal Polysemy: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of the Term ‘Bar’ in Polish Legal Discourse

Monika Kepa ^a

^a *Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland*

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Abstract. Legal ambiguity is inherently intertwined with psycholinguistic ambiguity. The term ‘Bar’ in the Polish Law on the Bar carries multiple normative and cognitive meanings, rendering it highly polysemous. The aim of this study is to establish that the polysemantic concept of ‘the Bar’, as used in the Polish legal context, presents interpretative challenges best understood within an integrated framework of legal science, cognitive linguistics, and psycholinguistics. The objective is to demonstrate that interpretative challenges surrounding the term arise not only from legal drafting practices but also from the cognitive architecture that shapes how legal actors perceive, decode, and operationalise legal linguistic information. Three distinct meanings of the Bar emerge: the professional role of providing legal assistance, the community of lawyers and trainee lawyers, and the self-governing organisational structure. The analysis employs methods of formal-dogmatic interpretation combined with cognitive-semantic framework, including Rosch’s (1975) prototype theory, Langacker’s (2008) cognitive grammar, and Wróblewski’s (1959) theory of legal interpretation. Results demonstrate that the Bar functions as a cognitively structured legal category organised around a prototypical core (the individual advocate) with collective and institutional peripheral extensions. These meanings form context-dependent construals of a unified conceptual base rather than competing definitions. The analysis showed that, from the cognitive grammar perspective, the Bar as a profession of public trust, as a community of lawyers and as an institutional entity has personal, functional, and structural profiles. The study concludes that normative ambiguity should be treated as systematic polysemy, governed by prototype effects and domain activation, and that it requires psycholinguistically informed interpretation to achieve pragmatic clarity.

Keywords: legal language, polysemy, cognitive linguistics, prototype theory, legal interpretation, professional self-governance, Bar.

Кепа Моніка. Когнітивна обробка юридичної полісемії: Психолінгвістичний аналіз терміна “Bar” в польському правовому дискурсі.

Анотація. Юридична неоднозначність тісно пов’язана з психолінгвістичною неоднозначністю. Термін “Bar” в польському Законі про адвокатуру має декілька

Monika Kepa,  0000-0001-9377-5160  monika.kepa@mail.umcs.pl

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нормативних і когнітивних значень, що надає йому високого ступеня полісемії. Метою цього дослідження є з'ясування того, які труднощі інтерпретації викликає полісемантичне поняття «адвокат» у польському правовому контексті, що найкраще можна осмислити в межах інтегрованої системи правознавства, когнітивної лінгвістики та психолінгвістики. Завдання полягає у демонстрації того, що труднощі інтерпретації цього терміна виникають не лише з практик юридичного нормопроєктування, а й із когнітивної архітектури, яка визначає те, як правозастосовні суб'єкти сприймають, декодують і операціоналізують мовну інформацію. Слід виокремлювати три значення «адвокатури»: професійна діяльність з надання правової допомоги, спільнота адвокатів і адвокатських стажерів, а також самоврядна організаційна структура. Аналіз ґрунтується на формально-догматичній інтерпретації у поєднанні з когнітивно-психолінгвістичним підходом, включно з теорією прототипів Е. Рош (1975), когнітивною граматикою Р. Ленеїкра (2008) та теорією юридичної інтерпретації Є. Врублевського (1959). Результати демонструють, що «адвокатура» функціонує як когнітивно структурована юридична категорія, організована навколо прототипового ядра (індивідуального адвоката) з колективними та інституційними додатковими значеннями як периферією. Ці значення формують не конкурентні дефініції, а радше контекстно залежні інтерпретації єдиної концептуальної бази. Аналіз засвідчив, що з погляду когнітивної граматики адвокатура як професія, що користується довірою суспільства, як спільнота юристів та як інституційна структура має особисті, функціональні та структурні профілі. Дослідження висновує, що нормативну неоднозначність слід розглядати як системну полісемію, зумовлену прототиповими ефектами та активацією доменів, а її усунення потребує психолінгвістично обґрунтованої інтерпретації для досягнення прагматичної чіткості.

Ключові слова: юридична мова, полісемія, когнітивна лінгвістика, теорія прототипів, юридична інтерпретація, професійне самоврядування, адвокатура.

Introduction

Cognitive-Linguistic Foundations of Legal Concept Processing

Advocacy is one of the professions of public trust defined in the Constitution. As a constitutional category, professions of public trust lack a normative definition. For a long time, the meaning of the concept of 'Bar' has been left to legal scholars and case law to determine. One of the most significant contributions to understanding ambiguities and the development of legal language within Poland's legal system was made by Jerzy Wróblewski. As Wróblewski (1959) explains, legal language serves as the medium through which legal prescriptions and norms are expressed. These legal prescriptions consist of two components: linguistic formulations (prescription-formulations) and their corresponding meanings (prescription-meanings). Legal language functions as a specialised variant of natural language. Consequently, it possesses several significant semantic and pragmatic characteristics inherent to natural language, including fuzziness, context-dependent meaning, and

effectiveness as a communicative tool. The features of legal language, when characterised as fuzzy, prove to be considerably problematic and contentious, with debates extending even to whether such fuzziness genuinely exists.

The concept of "legal interpretation" encompasses multiple meanings. In the broadest sense, this term denotes any attribution of meaning to a norm-formulation. This broad understanding of "interpretation" proves useful when examining legal language generally: every application of the language necessitates interpretation, conceptualised as an "extraction" of meaning from a linguistic formulation. The term "legal interpretation" also functions, particularly within the practical application of law, in a more restricted sense. In this narrower understanding, a norm-formulation demands interpretation exclusively when uncertainty exists regarding its meaning within a particular context. This more limited conception of "legal interpretation" is therefore pragmatic, since the same norm-formulation may require interpretation in some circumstances but not in others, where its "plain" meaning adequately serves the user's requirements. From this perspective, "interpretation" represents a "clarification" of the meaning of an ambiguous legal norm-formulation (Wróblewski, 1985, pp. 239-243). This constitutes the conventional approach to addressing fuzzy legal language, in which both its semantic properties and its pragmatic dimensions are significant. The notion of clarity possesses a pragmatic nature and connects to a specific situation that prompts operative interpretation.

Legal interpretation falls into three categories: linguistic, systemic, and functional. According to Wróblewski, these are guidelines rather than precise rules, and their application requires experience. Consequently, interpretation outcomes remain unpredictable and are shaped by the interpreter's perspective (Wróblewski, 1959, p. 143; Zalewska, 2017, p. 58).

Significant distinctions exist between operative interpretation and doctrinal interpretation. Operative interpretation clarifies the meaning of legal language in a specific case, determining which of the potential meanings is correct. The function of doctrinal interpretation is to resolve uncertainties by selecting 'the true meaning' from among the linguistic alternatives (Wróblewski, 1985, p. 245). Legal interpretation functions on the assumption that the legislator utilises identical linguistic expressions uniformly within one normative act that includes a lot of terms.

The Bar, as one of them, denotes a profession of public trust. The Bar Association, recognised in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland (April 2, 1997, Journal of Laws No. 78, item 483), is among the professional associations comprising occupations of public trust. The Constitution authorises statutes that establish self-governing bodies for such professions. This reflects the high

constitutional and systemic status of these bodies, underlining their significance and warranting further attention.

The term 'Bar' is a normative concept. The general rule of legal language is to use the same concept in the same meaning, especially within a given legal act, and to assign different meanings to different concepts (Gizbert-Studnicki, 1978; Lizisowa, 2018). The distinguished meanings of the concept of the Bar are not entirely identical, but they undoubtedly remain in complex and diverse relationships with each other, including personal, functional and structural ones. Based on the applicable normative regulations resulting from the basic legal act regulating the practice of the Bar and the functioning of the Bar association, the Act of May 26, 1982, on the Legal Profession (i.e., Journal of Laws of 2024, item 1564), the term 'Bar' can have several meanings. The bar association, as a professional association of a public trust profession, is by its very nature an expression of the decentralisation of state functions. In this respect, the activities of the bar association are special administrative activities of the state, carried out independently by a specific public law association vested with authority on the basis of and within the limits of the law. Undoubtedly, the professional activities of the Bar (personal meaning), consisting of the provision of legal assistance and the tasks of the self-governance of the Bar (functional meaning), are not identical. At the same time, these areas are interrelated, in particular in the sense that, on the basis of constitutional regulations specified in statutory provisions, the professional self-governance supervises the proper practice of the profession (structural meaning) within the limits of the public interest and for its protection.

In legal interpretation, normative meaning should be stable and uniform, while cognitive meaning is flexible and context-dependent. Legal language aims for precision, but polysemous terms like 'Bar' remain semantically flexible. Legal-dogmatic methods require a consistent meaning for each concept within a statute. Yet the statute gives several meanings to 'Bar,' causing latent ambiguity. The gap between normative clarity and cognitive variability shapes interpretations and affects the behaviour of legal actors.

The Bar is therefore both the name of a profession of public trust, the collective term for the Bar and trainee attorneys, and a self-governing organisation with a specific internal structure and tasks (Krzemiński, 1998). It is reasonable to decode these meanings in individual editorial units of the indicated act, and then to define their mutual relations. To this end, the current study is informed by cognitive-linguistic and psycholinguistic theories that provide valuable insights into how polysemous terms are processed. Lexical access involves the activation of multiple meanings before contextual cues constrain interpretation (Rosch, 1975; Traxler, 2012). Prototype theory

explains how readers form central exemplars of categories, such as the 'lawyer' prototype associated with expertise, independence, and ethical obligation (Lakoff, 1987). Langacker's (2008) theory of cognitive grammar suggests that the meaning of 'Bar' evokes different conceptual structures depending on co-textual and situational cues. Trust, central to professions of public trust, is understood as a socio-cognitive construct, activated and reinforced through specific linguistic cues (Barsalou, 1992).

Thus, the aim of this study is to establish that the polysemantic concept of 'the Bar', as used in the Polish legal context, presents interpretative challenges best understood within an integrated framework of legal science, cognitive linguistics, and psycholinguistics. This approach clarifies why ambiguity persists and how it can be analytically addressed.

Methodology

The present analysis employs an integrated psycholinguistic and cognitive framework to examine the triadic ambiguity of the term 'Bar'. The three psycholinguistic aspects of meaning within the Rosch's (1975) cover the prototype, periphery 1 and periphery 2, whereas from the cognitive grammar perspective they include personal, functional and structural profiles, respectively: (1) Bar as a professional role, (2) Bar as a community of lawyers and trainees, and (3) Bar as a self-governing organisation. Each dimension reflects a distinct conceptual frame with different cognitive triggers and normative functions. The coexistence of these frames within a single lexical item requires continuous disambiguation, placing a cognitive burden on interpreters.

Ambiguity arises when the statute employs the term 'Bar' without explicit disambiguation, leading to competition between conceptual frames. The professional (functional), personal, and institutional (structural) dimensions overlap, causing semantic interference. Legislative drafting practices that rely on polysemous terms without definitional clarification amplify this cognitive strain. Psycholinguistic analysis reveals why interpretative debates arise even when statutory text appears linguistically straightforward.

With the aim of disambiguating the meanings of the term 'Bar', the study uses a psycholinguistic approach and classic methods developed in legal sciences. The methodology combines formal-dogmatic interpretation with cognitive-grammar and psycholinguistic analysis. The legal dimension involves analysis of statutory provisions, constitutional norms, and case law. The formal-dogmatic method plays a fundamental role in the analysis of legal acts – the Law on the Bar and the Constitution of the Republic of Poland.

To decode the meaning of the concept of the Bar, an analysis of case law was conducted to determine the scope of legal assistance that constitutes the Bar’s practice, and to identify the profession, its functions and the structure of the Bar association.

The psycholinguistic dimension applied a model of prototype–periphery structure while the cognitive grammar approach was to examine how legal actors profile the term ‘Bar’ – as having personal, functional or structural meaning (see Table 1). Thus, this integrated approach revealed interactions between normative meaning and cognitive processing.

Table 1

Psycholinguistic and Cognitive Aspects of Meaning of ‘the Bar’

Meaning	Theory of prototypes	Cognitive grammar
Bar as a role	Prototype	Personal
Bar as a community of lawyers and trainees	Periphery 1	Functional
Bar as a self-governing organisation	Periphery 2	Structural

In addition, a comparative method was used in the research. This concerns the comparison of normative meanings of the concept of advocacy and their mutual relationship, leading to an assessment of the validity and correctness of the solutions adopted in statutory regulations.

The issues under study are discussed in the literature, but in an isolated, separate manner. However, there is no comprehensive analysis from the perspective of “legal language” covering the psycholinguistic approach to the term ‘bar’ and the interpretation assignment to specific editorial units of the Bar Act. The literature in the field of legal sciences concerns the scope of the Bar’s professional activities, the composition of the Bar, and the organisational structure and tasks of the Bar association as a self-governing body of a profession of public trust (Młynarska-Sobaczewska, 2023). The sources used primarily include excerpts from larger studies, commentaries on the Act on the Bar, and articles and case law.

Results

Prototype Activation: The Bar As Professional Role

As a profession of public trust, the Bar requires expert knowledge, ethical commitment, and independence. Psycholinguistically, this meaning activates

the prototype of the practising lawyer, i.e. personal domain. This prototype influences how legal actors and laypersons interpret statutory references to the Bar, often privileging the professional meaning even when the statute refers to organisational structures. The cognitive representation of trust underpins public acceptance of the Bar's professional authority.

The legal profession should be considered a profession of public trust due to the following characteristics:

a) performing specific activities constituting the provision of legal assistance, in particular to natural persons in the event of a threat to goods of significant importance (e.g. life, health, freedom, dignity),

b) the need to ensure the proper and public interest-compliant practice of this profession, given the importance of professional activities in the supra-individual dimension, for society and the state,

c) the care taken by representatives of this profession to protect the interests of persons using their services and to ensure the protection of the subjective rights of individuals guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Poland,

d) obtaining information concerning the private lives of persons using the services of the Bar, which is covered by the attorney-client privilege,

e) possession of appropriate qualifications to practise the profession, including formal education and skills,

f) guaranteeing the proper and public interest-compliant practice of the profession, taking into account the specific standards of professional ethics for lawyers,

g) independence in the practice of the profession,

h) membership in a bar association (Judgment of the Constitutional Tribunal, 2015; Sarnecki, 2000; Smarż, 2012).

The Bar is one of the professions defined as a set of specific tasks or activities within the social division of labour. Most professions, including that of a lawyer, require specific knowledge and qualifications acquired through education, which are verified by a formal state bar exam. A factor contributing to the category of a profession is the undertaking of activities aimed at achieving the goal of obtaining income that constitutes the basis for the livelihood and existence of a given natural person. Due to the specific nature of professional activities and the mission-oriented character of the Bar itself, remuneration is defined as a fee and has certain distinctive features, including the manner in which its amount is determined.

As a rule, activities constituting the practice of a given profession are undertaken in a permanent and repetitive manner (Szydło, 2016). A profession can only be practised by a given natural person in person, which, in the case of

the legal profession, is linked to the special trust between a given lawyer and their client. The very concept of practising a profession does not, in principle, raise any doubts. Both its colloquial understanding and dictionary definition correspond to the meaning attributed to professions in practice and in science. By way of illustration, it can be pointed out that, in linguistic terms, to practise means to work in a particular profession, while practising means doing something; in particular, one can practise a particular job or profession.

The practice of law as a Bar consists of providing legal assistance, in particular giving legal advice, preparing legal opinions, drafting legal documents and appearing before courts and authorities (Article 4(1) of the Law on the Bar). This list is not exhaustive, but indicates the typical and most common activities in practice. Legal assistance is provided to natural persons, business entities and organisational units, which are understood to mean state or local government bodies, legal persons, social or political organisations and other entities without legal personality (Article 4(2) and (3) of the Law on the Bar). In the performance of their professional duties, lawyers are subject only to the law, and the professional title of "the Bar" is protected by law (Article 1(3) and (4) of the Law on the Bar).

The literature points to a subjective and an objective approach to the provision of legal assistance as the essence of the legal profession. A bond based on special trust between the client and the Bar providing the service, is connected with the transfer of private information and the maintenance of attorney-client privilege (Sołtys, 2022; Kielin-Maziarz, 2025).

Professional activities constituting the provision of such legal assistance may be performed by a lawyer in the forms specified in the Law on the Bar, according to which a lawyer practises his profession:

- 1) in a law firm,
- 2) in a team of lawyers,
- 3) in a civil law partnership or general partnership, where the partners are attorneys, legal advisors, patent attorneys, tax advisors or foreign lawyers,
- 4) in a partnership, where the partners are attorneys, legal advisors, patent attorneys, tax advisors or foreign lawyers;
- 5) in a limited partnership or joint-stock limited partnership, where the general partners are attorneys, legal advisors, patent attorneys, tax advisors or foreign lawyers (Article 4a(1) of the Law on the Bar).

Membership in the indicated companies applies to foreign lawyers practising on a permanent basis in accordance with the provisions of the Act of 5 July 2002 on the provision of legal assistance by foreign lawyers in the Republic of Poland (i.e. Journal of Laws of 2020, item 823). The sole purpose of

the indicated companies may be to provide legal assistance within the meaning described above (Article 4a(2) of the Law on the Bar). It should be emphasised that the Bar may not practise if he or she is in an employment relationship; however, this prohibition does not apply to research and research-teaching staff (Article 4b(1)(1) and (3) of the Law on the Bar).

The above meaning of the concept of the bar as a profession of special importance is evident in the first section of the law on the bar. It states, among other things, that the bar is established to provide legal assistance and to cooperate in the protection of civil rights and freedoms (Article 1(1) of the Law on the Bar) The legal profession as the practice of the Bar is referred to in the Law on the Bar in a provision stating that a team of lawyers is an organisational unit of the Bar (Article 17 of the Law on the Bar). A law firm is one of the forms of practising the Bar's profession, i.e., performing professional activities, such as providing legal assistance. This meaning is also referred to in the regulation according to which inspectors exercise control over the performance by law firms and the Bar of the provisions of this Act and other provisions concerning the legal profession, understood as the practice of a profession consisting in the provision of legal assistance (Article 62(2) of the Law on the Bar).

Social Categorisation and Professional Identity: The Bar As Community

The statutory community of the Bar comprises lawyers and trainee lawyers. Social identity theory demonstrates how individuals categorise themselves into professional groups through linguistic and cognitive cues. Trainees undergo conceptual enculturation—internalising professional language, normative expectations, and ethical standards. This creates distinctive interpretive schemas that facilitate ambiguity resolution for in-group members. However, the overlap of personal and institutional frames creates interpretive challenges in statutory provisions.

The Law on the Bar stipulates that the bar consists of all lawyers and trainee lawyers (Article 2). This is a fundamental regulation for the considerations at hand, as it essentially determines the nature of the bar as a professional self-governing community – a professional self-government association of persons practising a profession of public trust.

In the context of self-governance, it is important to define the nature of membership in the self-governing community of lawyers. Membership in self-governing bodies of professions of public trust is sometimes described as compulsory, but this is a simplification (Borowicz, 2012). The element of voluntariness refers to the original and free choice of the profession of the Bar, which, given the required level of knowledge, is tantamount to awareness of

membership in the self-government arising by virtue of law (Supreme Court, 2014). Membership in this type of self-government constitutes a bond of a public-law nature and, at the same time, a relatively compulsory bond (Starościek, 1960; Pawłowski, 2020). This nature of membership enables the local government – the bar association in the structural sense – to perform tasks, including in particular those constituting the constitutional function of supervising the proper performance of the profession by members of the local government – the bar association in the personal sense.

The bar is a non-territorial, functional, special self-government body (Pawłowski, 2009). Non-territorial self-governments of this kind are an extremely important, fundamental legal institution, constituting one of the foundations of the state system (Judgment of the Constitutional Tribunal, 2008). The professional self-government of the Bar is a self-government of a profession of public trust, whose distinguishing feature and binding force is the professional bond. In the case of professional non-territorial self-governments, their only substrate is the members forming a community consisting of persons practising a given profession (the Bar) or formally preparing to practise it (trainee lawyers)

Individual professional associations of public trust are socially distinct groups defined by law on the basis of constitutional regulations, whose membership arises from those regulations. At the same time, membership of a specific professional association of this kind is conditional upon the fulfilment of certain conditions defined by law.

The following persons may be enrolled in the list of the Bar:

1. is of impeccable character and, through their conduct to date, provides a guarantee of the proper performance of the Bar;
2. enjoys full public rights and has full legal capacity;
3. has completed higher legal studies in the Republic of Poland and obtained a master's degree or foreign legal studies recognised in the Republic of Poland;
4. has completed a legal internship in the Republic of Poland and passed the bar exam (Article 65 of the Law on the Bar). There are statutory exceptions to the latter requirement, including professors and habilitated doctors of law, as well as persons who have held the position of judge, prosecutor or practised as a legal advisor or notary (Article 66(1) and (2) of the Law on the Bar).

A trainee lawyer may be a person who:

1. is of impeccable character and, through their conduct to date, provides a guarantee of the proper performance of the profession of the Bar;

2. has completed higher legal studies in the Republic of Poland and obtained a master's degree or foreign legal studies recognised in the Republic of Poland;
3. has passed the entrance examination for admission to the bar (Article 75(2) in conjunction with Article 63(1)-(3) of the Law on the Bar).

The Act therefore establishes not a uniform but a dual nature of membership of persons grouped in the self-government, which is justified and dependent on the acquisition of the right to independently perform professional activities of providing legal assistance, as a rule, on the basis of completing a legal training programme and passing the bar exam.

Trainee lawyers meet most of the requirements for the Bar, and the purpose of the three-year bar training is to prepare the trainee to practise the profession of the Bar properly and independently, in particular to develop skills in litigation, drafting letters, contracts and opinions, and to learn the rules of professional conduct (Article 76(1) of the Law on the Bar). In this sense, local government is a group of people with specific attributes, formally confirmed, and connected by a community of collective professional interests resulting from social ties concentrated within local government (Szydło, 2016).

In the above sense, the term 'Bar' as a group of the Bar and trainee lawyers was used in the provision of the Law on the Bar, which stipulates that the Bar is organised on the principles of professional self-government (Article 1(2)), and also transfers to the scope of activity of the Supreme Bar Council the representation of the Bar, i.e. members of the bar self-government (Article 58(1)), the exercise of control by inspectors over the implementation by bar teams and the Bar of the provisions of this Act and other provisions concerning the Bar (Article 62(2)), and withdrawal from the Bar (Article 72(1)(2)).

Institutional Schema Activation: The Bar As Organizational Structure

Normatively, the Bar functions as a professional self-government with national and regional bodies. Psycholinguistically, organisational concepts are processed through institutional schemas that differ significantly from schemas associated with professional roles. The activation of incompatible schemas (professional vs institutional) increases cognitive load and may lead to misinterpretation. The statute often requires readers to shift rapidly between these schemas, which contributes to ambiguity. The analysis below aims to provide an understanding of the term in the context of the Bar as an organisational structure.

In accordance with the Law on the Bar, the bar is organised on the principles of professional self-government (Article 1(2) of the Law on the Bar).

As a professional self-government body, the bar constitutes a specific organisational structure. In the concept of self-government, regardless of its specific form, the organisation and functioning of the system are noticeable (Kępa, 2021).

Self-governance is a system of organisation and management whereby a group of people independently manages its activities according to rules established by itself or assigned to it, through bodies elected by itself (Doroszewski, 1969).

The Constitution of the Republic of Poland, which provides for the admissibility of the statutory establishment of self-governance for professions of public trust, defines their functions. These consist of representing persons practising a given profession of public trust and supervising the proper performance of a specific profession within the limits of the public interest and for its protection (Article 17(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, Smarż, 2024). These functions are fundamental and directional, and are identical across all self-governance associations representing professions of public trust. The above functions are carried out through tasks assigned by law to individual self-governance associations, including public-interest tasks. The tasks that make up these functions can be performed thanks to the activities of specific organisational structures (Kmieciak, 2008).

On the basis of the Law on the Bar, the task of the professional self-governance of the bar is:

- 1) creating conditions for the performance of the statutory tasks of the Bar;
- 2) representing the Bar and protecting its rights;
- 3) supervising the compliance with regulations governing the practice of the Bar;
- 4 professional development of the Bar and training of trainee barristers);
- 5) establishing and promoting professional ethics and ensuring compliance with them;
- 6) cooperating with self-governance units in providing free legal aid referred to in the Act of 5 August 2015 on free legal aid, free civic counselling and legal education (i.e. Journal of Laws of 2024, item 1534);
- 7) managing and disposing of the assets of the self-governance of the bar (Article 3(1) of the Law on the Bar).

Due to the nature of the tasks performed by the self-governance, the Act stipulates that the Minister of Justice shall supervise the activities of the self-governance within the scope and in the forms specified in the law on the bar (Article 3(2) of the law on the bar). The prevailing view in the literature is that the list of the above tasks is exhaustive (Eysymontt & Piesiewicz, 2023; Świstak, 2018). At the same time, these tasks are defined differently and consist of specific competences assigned to the authorities of this self-governance.

By establishing a self-governance of the Bar, the state legally entrusts this organised social group, united by their profession, with the performance of public tasks (Smarż, 2025). The above constitutes their decentralisation; in order to enable the fulfilment of the tasks assigned to it, this self-governance is equipped with appropriate competences, which consist of powers and, at the same time, obligations assigned to the normatively regulated organisational structures of self-governance (Judgment of the Constitutional Tribunal of 7 March 2012, ref. no. K 3/10, OTK-A 2012, No. 3, item 25). As a specific form of self-governance, a group of people united to perform the tasks entrusted to it requires organisational units, bodies, and representatives. In institutional (organisational) terms, self-governance is not a single entity, but a complex structure – a team of related organisational units that constitute a form of personal organisation and operate through bodies (Cherka, 2009). The bar association's self-governance has an extensive two-tier structure, with organisational units at both the regional (bar associations) and national (Supreme Bar Council) levels.

The Law on the Bar stipulates that the Supreme Bar Council, bar associations, and bar teams have legal personality (Article 10). In the context under consideration, the Supreme Bar Council and bar associations should be regarded as professional self-governance bodies of the Bar. It should be noted that the legal nature of the above legal entities differs (Gawryluk, 2012). The Bar Association consists of the Bar and trainee lawyers who have their professional headquarters within the territory of the Bar Association, the territorial scope of which is determined by the Supreme Bar Council, taking into account, in particular, the territorial division of the court administration (Article 38 of the Law on the Bar). The headquarters of the bar associations are located in: Białystok, Bielsko-Biała, Bydgoszcz, Częstochowa, Gdańsk, Katowice, Kielce, Koszalin, Kraków, Lublin, Łódź, Olsztyn, Opole, Płock, Poznań, Radom, Rzeszów, Sielce, Szczecin, Toruń, Wałbrzych, Warsaw, Wrocław and Zielona Góra (Supreme Bar Council, 1975).

However, the teams of lawyers referred to in the aforementioned provision have legal personality but are not organisational units of the Bar's professional self-governance, although the Law on the Bar stipulates that a team of lawyers is an organisational unit of the Bar (Article 17). The Bar referred to in this provision relates to the professional activities of the Bar as one of the forms of practising this profession provided for in the Act. This is indicated by the location of the regulations concerning legal teams in Section II of the Law on the Bar entitled 'Practising the profession of the Bar' and further detailed regulations relating to the rules of operation of this historically established form of practising the profession of the Bar (e.g., Article 4a(1), Article 18, Article 25 of the Law on the Bar; Cherka, 2009).

Discussion

Cognitive-Linguistic Reconstruction of Legal Polysemy

The cognitive-linguistic reconstruction of the normative ambiguity of the concept of the Bar discussed in this study draws on the core assumptions of Wróblewski's (1959) theory of legal interpretation, Rosch's (1975) theory of categorisation, and Langacker's (2008) cognitive grammar.

This study examined the polysemous nature of the term 'Bar' in Polish legal language through an integrated framework combining legal interpretation, cognitive grammar, and psycholinguistic theory of prototypes. The cognitive analysis identified three distinct but interconnected profiles of meanings – personal, functional and structural: the Bar as a professional role, as a community of practitioners and trainees, and as a self-governing organisational structure. These findings demonstrate that normative ambiguity arises not solely from legislative drafting but from the cognitive architecture underlying meaning construction and interpretation.

From a cognitive-linguistic standpoint, the assumption retains its validity not at the formal definitional plane but at the plane of conceptual unity. While the identical term designates different functional realities, all applications of 'the Bar' stay grounded in a single unified conceptual model organised around the profession of legal assistance. The assumption of consistency is thus satisfied cognitively rather than lexicographically.

This reconceptualisation synthesises Wróblewski's theory with prototype semantics: consistency does not demand identity of denotation but rather stability of the conceptual core and predictability of peripheral extensions. According to Rosch (1975), natural categories are organised around prototypical cores rather than fixed sets of necessary and sufficient conditions. The concept of the Bar demonstrates a non-classical category structure. In the analysed legal act, the most prototypical instantiation of the Bar is the practising advocate providing legal assistance. This prototype exhibits the highest degree of family resemblance with other uses of the term.

The organisational and collective meanings of the Bar, however, represent two peripheral extensions of this prototype. The Bar as a self-governing organisation and the Bar as a community of advocates and trainees form conceptually motivated radial extensions. These peripheral meanings retain some, but not all, properties of the prototype, while simultaneously introducing new institutional features, which explains both their functional linkage and their semantic instability. This explains why legal interpretation encounters difficulties: the statute presupposes a shared cognitive prototype,

but shifts between central and peripheral category members without explicit differentiation. This prototype-based structure justifies partial semantic overlap rather than strict ambiguity.

Langacker's (2008) theory of cognitive grammar emphasises that linguistic meaning activates encyclopaedic domains rather than isolated definitions. The term 'Bar' therefore profiles three different facets of a complex conceptual network, such as personal, functional and structural. They are aligned with professional practice, collective identity, and institutional organisation.

The analysis developed above demonstrates how different statutory provisions profile different domains of this conceptual network. When legal provisions regulate professional duties, the 'profession' personal domain is activated. When the statute regulates elections, finances, supervision, or disciplinary liability, the 'institutional' structural domain becomes foregrounded. The community meaning activates functional domain.

This domain-based profiling explains interpretative variation without assuming semantic inconsistency. The legal text systematically shifts construal rather than meaning. In this sense, one should speak about interpretation rather than understanding. In Wróblewski's (1959) theory, interpretation is distinguished from understanding, which is sufficient in cases where no doubts arise and which does not require any argumentative effort (Wojtczak & Zeifert, 2025). Each statutory context construes the same conceptual base from a different vantage point.

On this basis, the Bar emerges as a cognitively unified, polysemous legal concept structured by a prototypical professional core (the individual advocate), a collective-personal extension (the professional community), and an institutional-organisational extension (the system of self-governance). These layers do not compete for meaning but form a coherent conceptual system governed by prototype effects, domain activation, and contextual construal.

This cognitive framework has direct implications for legal interpretation. Normative ambiguity should be treated as systematic polysemy rather than as a semantic defect. As the purpose of legal interpretation is pragmatic clarity (Wojtczak & Zeifert, 2025, p. 768), this legal interpretation should identify which conceptual domain is activated in a given provision. Normative coherence is maintained through cognitive unity rather than through terminological uniformity.

This approach strengthens functional and systemic interpretation and explains why purely legal or linguistic interpretations may fail to resolve disputes concerning the scope, conceptual applicability and legal status of the Bar.

Implications for Legal Cognition and Professional Practice

The findings have direct implications for legal practice and education. For legislative drafting, awareness of cognitive processing constraints suggests that complex polysemous terms should be accompanied by explicit definitions or context-specific markers to reduce interpretive burden. For legal practitioners, understanding the prototype structure of 'the Bar' can enhance accuracy in statutory interpretation and reduce miscommunication in professional contexts. Legal education programs may benefit from integrating psycholinguistic training to improve students' awareness of cognitive mechanisms underlying legal interpretation.

Limitations of the Study and Directions for Further Psycholinguistic Research

This study focused exclusively on the Polish Law on the Bar and may not generalise to other legal systems or professions of public trust. Future research could compare the cognitive-linguistic structure of similar professional categories across jurisdictions. Additionally, empirical studies examining how legal practitioners process and interpret the term 'Bar' in real time would provide valuable validation of the theoretical framework proposed here. Investigation of other polysemous legal concepts using this integrated methodology could further advance understanding of legal language processing.

Conclusions

It is usually possible to interpret the meaning of the term 'Bar' in the analysed act from its normative context. At the same time, as has been pointed out, these meanings sometimes overlap within individual sections of the Law on the Bar and encompass different conceptual dimensions, highlighting their close interconnection. This applies in particular to the Bar as a community of lawyers and trainee lawyers, and to the Bar as an organisational structure that is a form of organisational and legal institutionalisation of a personal self-governing community. When assessing the above solution, it should be considered accurate in principle, as it reflects the essence of the bar association as a non-territorial professional association bringing together persons practising a profession of public trust. The basis of this self-governance consists exclusively of natural persons practising or formally preparing to practise a profession involving the provision of legal assistance. This is also indicated by the title of the legal act – The Law on the Bar – which shows that

its content concerns the rules governing the practice of the profession of providing legal assistance, as well as the organisational structure of the functional self-governance body that brings together those who perform such professional activities.

The analysis above has demonstrated that the ambiguity of the term 'Bar' is both normative and psycholinguistic. Legal clarity requires acknowledging the cognitive processes that shape meaning construction. A psycholinguistically informed approach to interpretation offers a more realistic understanding of how legal actors process complex legal concepts.

Psycholinguistic insights are also valuable for understanding interpretative variability. Recognising cognitive constraints can inform legislative drafting, reducing ambiguity by providing explicit definitions or using distinct terms for organisational bodies, professional roles, and community members. For practitioners and trainees, awareness of cognitive mechanisms can enhance interpretative accuracy and reduce miscommunication. Integrating psycholinguistic training into legal education may improve professional performance and public trust. This interdisciplinary perspective enhances both theoretical insight and practical application.

The integrated application of psycholinguistic, cognitive linguistic and legal interpretation theories of Rosch, Langacker, and Wróblewski demonstrates that the normative concept of the Bar constitutes a cognitively structured legal category with a stable prototype and peripheries along with multiple context-dependent profiles – personal, functional and structural. This theoretical framework deepens the study's analytical foundations and provides a coherent explanation of the conceptual unity underlying its observed semantic variability.

Disclosure Statement

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