



## Research Article

# APPLICATION OF TALMY'S THREE-STEP PROCESS FOR READING COMPREHENSION OF LEGAL TEXTS

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## ABSTRACT

*This research aims to enhance comprehension of legal texts by applying Talmy's (2017) three-step process for identifying and integrating referents from contextual cues into linguistic forms. Drawing on pragmatics, discourse analysis, cognitive semantics, and Talmy's force dynamics notion, a qualitative content analysis investigates the cognitive processes readers use for cue detection, attention allocation, and semantic integration when reading court indictments. Data from 10 Vietnamese indictments covering various criminal charges allows analyzing the distribution and interaction of lexical, collateral, background, and temporal cue categories to understand how they facilitate or impede comprehension. The findings shed light on cognitive mechanisms underlying legal indictment comprehension and identify factors enhancing or hindering understanding. Ultimately, the study aims to improve legal professionals' ability to effectively utilize contextual cues when interpreting written legal processes, regulations, and arguments, thereby enhancing accuracy and efficiency in comprehending legal texts, particularly those in English or foreign languages.*

**Keywords:** cognitive semantics; force dynamics; legal text; referent identification

## 1. Introduction

Language comprehension entails the process of deciphering contextual signals through a three-step process: detecting cues, allocating attention, and integrating semantics (Talmy, 2017). Investigating this complex process has the potential to significantly improve our comprehension of language and the cognitive mechanisms that underlie it. Earlier research has looked at different parts of this three-step process, such as how the prominence of a cue affects the allocation of resources (Altmann & Steedman, 1988), how contextual cues help resolve ambiguity (Crain & Steedman, 1985), how to find chronological cues (Dahan & Tanenhaus, 2005), and how semantic integration varies between individuals (Pickering & Garrod, 2004). Nevertheless, these studies predominantly concentrated on particular components or employed methodologies that may not faithfully portray the interaction

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among the three stages over time. Furthermore, a comprehensive investigation of contextual elements such as pragmatics and speech structure has not been conducted in-depth (Huang & Snedeker, 2009; Rohde et al., 2011).

To overcome these limitations, this research employs an integrated strategy by utilizing experimental tasks that are rich in context to thoroughly examine the three-stage process. The study tries to determine the cognitive mechanisms behind each stage and their relationships by observing individuals processing sentences with different environmental signals. This study also looks at how contextual support, individual cognitive differences, and cue salience affect the outcome, to figure out what makes this process work better or worse (Novick et al., 2008; Trueswell & Tanenhaus, 1994; Wilson & Sperber, 2004). The study's findings may help to improve communication techniques and language processing models by providing a comprehensive understanding of the targeting system's components and interactions.

More precisely, the results of this research could improve understanding of legal processes, regulations, and the arguments put forward in written legal papers. The study aims to clarify the cognitive foundations of language comprehension to improve the clarity and effectiveness of communicating complicated information in legal settings. In conclusion, this thorough examination of the three-step process of language comprehension shows potential for enhancing both theoretical understanding and practical applications in domains where exact comprehension is crucial.

## **2. Content of the research**

### **2.1. Literature review**

#### **2.1.1. Historical background**

Talmy (2017) proposes a three-step process consisting of cue detection, attention allocation, and semantic integration to recognize and incorporate referents into linguistic structures. This approach integrates knowledge from pragmatics, discourse analysis, cognitive semantics, and Talmy's force dynamics principles.

Levinson's (1983) work highlights the significance of anaphora and deixis in transmitting speech context, with a specific focus on pragmatics, which examines language usage in different contexts. Huang's (2007) research emphasizes the importance of pragmatic information in comprehending the intended meaning of deictic and anaphoric expressions. These studies emphasize the importance of contextual cues in their detection.

Discourse analysis has deepened our comprehension of the interaction between different elements of language within wider contexts. Grice's (1975) theory of conversational implicature, which says that communication follows rules and principles of cooperation, has a big impact on how we understand the context of anaphoric and deictic phrases. This idea guides the process of distributing attention, giving priority to significant cues.

Cognitive semantics explores the connection between language and cognitive processes, providing valuable insight into the integration of meaning. According to Ariel's (1990) accessibility theory, the comprehensibility of a referent shapes the use of anaphoric words, which link recognized referents with language structures.

Talmy's force dynamics idea, which investigates the interaction and transmission of force between entities, provides a framework for understanding language comprehension dynamics. The text examines the influence of specific cues on the listener's focus and understanding during the three stages. Thus, Talmy's methodology incorporates information from other disciplines, providing a comprehensive structure for analyzing the intricate cognitive processes associated with language comprehension. This amalgamation of concepts expands our understanding of how people navigate their environment and achieve effective interaction.

#### *2.1.2. Talmy's (2000) three-step process*

Talmy (2000) presents a three-step process that explains the cognitive processes used to recognize and combine referents from contextual inputs into language forms. This technique is especially crucial in comprehending legal writings, which can include intricate language and contextual information. The three steps are:

##### **Cue detection:**

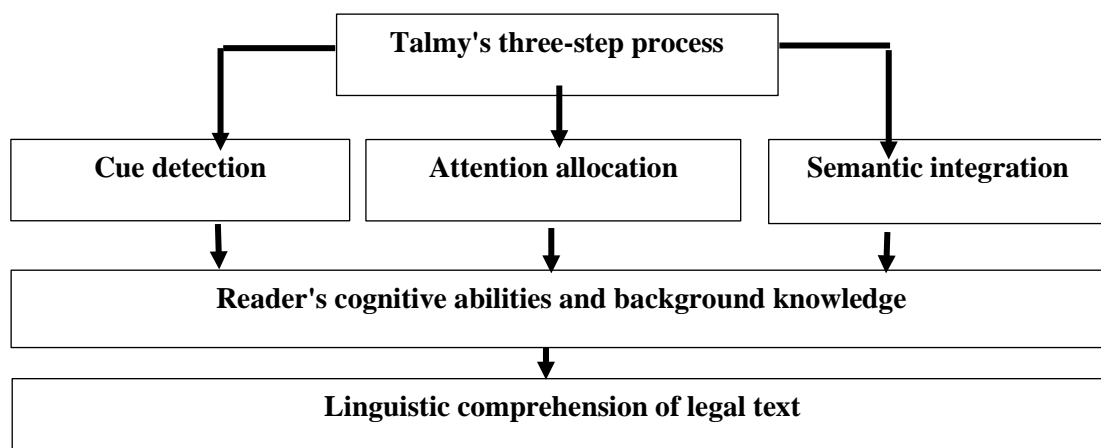
In the initial phase, the reader has to recognize the contextual cues or cues that provide information about the intended referent. Verbal cues can include pronouns, descriptors, or language used for reference purposes. For instance, inside a legal document, the term "defendant" functions as a cue that refers to a certain person.

##### **Attention allocation:**

After the cues are detected, the reader needs to use their attentional resources to analyze and appreciate their importance. This entails giving priority to the most prominent indications while rejecting unnecessary information. Factors such as cue prominence, individual cognitive abilities (such as working memory), and contextual support impact the allocation of attention. Legal writings use several techniques, such as formatting, repetition, and placement, to highlight certain cues, affecting the reader's allocation of attention.

##### **Semantic integration:**

Semantic integration in legal texts involves using contextual and pragmatic cues to determine the intended meaning of words or expressions. This process resolves uncertainties, draws conclusions, and integrates the issue into the broader language structure. Talmy's (2000) three-step process focuses on understanding legal texts by identifying and integrating referents from contextual cues.



*Figure 1. Talmy's three-step process in reading comprehension of legal texts*

### 2.1.3. Cue categories in legal texts

Talmy (2017) posits that a cue is an indirect form of guidance that assists a reader in recognizing and comprehending the intended referent or meaning inside a text. Cues provide contextual assistance that enables the reader to narrow down and understand the precise topic that the writer intends to communicate. Legal documents may include many sorts of cues to facilitate comprehension:

#### **Lexical cues:**

**Core cues** in the text are derived from trigger words or phrases such as pronouns and adjectives, which indicate certain features of the referent.

**Co-form cues** are derived from the language features in close proximity to the trigger, aiding in the identification of the referent.

#### **Collateral cues:**

**Targetive cues** are characteristics exhibited by the referent itself that the reader can perceive from the legal text.

**Reader-focus cues** indicate that the reader's current object of attention may be the intended referent.

#### **Background cue:**

**Environmental cues** arise from aspects of the context or situation described in the legal text that help locate or define the boundaries of the referent.

**Epistemic cues** come from the reader's own knowledge and beliefs about the referent or legal subject matter.

#### **Temporal cue:**

**Chronal cues** rely on the timing or process in which the trigger or referent is mentioned in the legal text to aid identification.

**Perichronal cues** are temporal properties of other elements in the text that determine their relevance as cues for comprehending the referent.

## **2.2. Methodology**

### *2.2.1. Research methods*

This study uses a qualitative research approach to assess the cognitive processes involved in Talmy's three-step model for reading comprehension of legal materials. It employs content analysis and text analysis tools to analyze written, spoken, or visual cues in communication. The research will examine legal text passages, focusing on contextual cues relevant to cue detection, attention allocation, and semantic integration. The text samples will be carefully chosen to include various cue types, complexity levels, and legal contexts.

### *2.2.2. Data collection*

Examining legal texts entails recognizing contextual indicators and integrating them with language patterns. This study examines Talmy's three-step cognitive process, which includes cue detection, attention allocation, and semantic integration. The analysis specifically focuses on the cues identified in Vietnamese indictments. We gathered data from 10 indictments, each covering a wide range of criminal charges, so order to illustrate a comprehensive range of legal situations. The indictments underwent a detailed examination to discover various cues, which were then sorted and condensed for a comprehensive study. Our objective is to investigate how these cues contribute to the understanding of legal texts and improve the cognitive processing of these documents. This method offers a thorough comprehension of the cognitive processes involved in comprehending legal text within the Vietnamese legal system.

### *2.2.3. Data analysis*

The study uses Talmy's three-step model to analyze contextual cues for understanding legal texts. It identifies lexical, collateral, background, and temporal cues for each of the 10 coded indictment samples. The attention allocation stage examines the most prevalent cue types across the indictments, determining their distribution and frequency. The semantic integration stage examines how these cues facilitate or hinder comprehension of the legal text. The analysis of specific passages reveals how the interplay of cue types effectively conveys the intended meaning or leads to ambiguity. The findings shed light on the cognitive mechanisms that underlie the comprehension of legal indictments and identify potential areas for optimizing contextual cue usage to enhance clarity in legal contexts.

## **3. Three-step process in reading comprehension of legal texts**

### *3.1. Step of cue detection*

This section aims to explore the first phase of cue detection in Talmy's three-step process for understanding legal texts. The study looks into how readers perceive and acknowledge different contextual cues, including lexical, collateral, background, and temporal cues, that are vital to comprehending the intended referents and meanings in legal communication.

### 3.1.1. Lexical cues in reading comprehension of legal texts

Lexical cues are essential in understanding legal writings, serving as language markers for complex vocabulary and concepts. Accurately identifying and analyzing these cues helps readers comprehend the intended meanings and processes in legal situations. Core referents, like nouns or phrases, represent the main things, individuals, or concepts relevant to the legal issue, often used in legal indictments.

*From 2021-2023 in Can Tho, defendant Duong Van M organized large-scale gambling operations with multiple syndicates. The defendant was sentenced to six years imprisonment. (CTR10)*

The core referent *defendant Duong Van M* is a crucial lexical cue that establishes the individual at the center of the legal proceedings.

After identifying the core referents, readers must then locate the co-form cues, which are descriptive phrases or clauses that provide additional details about the core referents, such as time, place, or other contextual information. In the case of the gambling operation charge (CTR10), the co-form cues *from 2021-2023 in Can Tho* and *organized large-scale gambling operations with multiple syndicates* offer crucial details about the nature, duration, and location of the alleged crime.

Through painstaking examination of linguistic cues, readers can get a more thorough comprehension of the noteworthy individuals, occurrences, and concerns within the legal dispute. Examine the provided passage from a legal document concerning the unlawful distribution of narcotics (CTR4):

*In 5/2022, defendant Pham Van E was caught smuggling 5kg of crystal methamphetamine across the Quang Ninh border. The defendant was sentenced to the death penalty. (CTR4)*

In this context, the key term *defendant Pham Van E* serves to identify the main individual involved, while the additional terms *in 5/2022*, *smuggling 5kg of crystal methamphetamine*, and *across the Quang Ninh border* provide crucial information regarding the timing, nature, and location of the alleged crime.

Legal writings require precise identification and a combination of linguistic hints to develop a cognitive structure for understanding complex information. This aligns with Talmy's theoretical framework, which emphasizes the importance of lexical cues in comprehension. Accurate identification of these cues sets the foundation for efficient attention allocation and meaning integration in later stages. Lexical cues help readers understand complex vocabulary and concepts in legal discourse, enhancing their comprehension of intended meanings, arguments, and processes.

### 3.1.2. Collateral cues in reading comprehension of legal texts

Collateral cues are essential in understanding legal texts. We can categorize them into two types: targetive cues and reader-focus cues. Targetive cues provide descriptive

information about the subject's unique traits, while reader-focused cues provide contextual information. For instance, a Vietnamese legal document might provide a detailed description of a particular subject.

*From 2021-2023 in Can Tho, defendant Duong Van M organized large-scale gambling operations with multiple syndicates. The defendant was sentenced to six years imprisonment. (CTR10)*

In the present scenario, the term *large-scale gambling operations* acts as a targetive cue, offering essential information regarding the defendant's purported criminal activities, including their nature and magnitude. These cues enhance the reader's mental image of the referent by providing contextual information about underlying intrinsic features, situations, or attributes.

However, reader-focus cues direct the reader's attention to the particular entity or notion that should be the main focus of their cognitive efforts. Consider the sentence provided in Indictment CTR1 as an example:

*In the murder case on 12/3/2022, defendant Nguyen Van A fatally stabbed victim Tran Thi B, a neighbor, with a sharp object at his residence in Hanoi due to personal conflicts. (CTR1)*

The phrase *murder case* acts as a reader-focus cue, drawing the reader's attention to the central issue being discussed – a homicide case.

Legal writing involves a complex process of identifying and combining contextual and linguistic cues to provide a deeper understanding of topics. Clear collateral cues help readers identify unique features and focus on important components, while unclear or complicated language can impede comprehension. Talmy's three-step cue detection process relies on the careful integration of collateral and lexical cues, allowing readers to align their mental representations with the intended message in the legal text. Proficiency in identifying and combining supporting cues improves comprehension of legal texts, enabling readers to understand the subtleties, processes, and effects of legal processes, judgments, and arguments.

### 3.1.3. Background and temporal cues in reading comprehension of legal texts

Legal documents require readers to be proficient in recognizing and using backdrop, temporal, lexical, and collateral cues. Background cues are divided into two subcategories: environmental and epistemic. Environmental cues provide contextual information about specific circumstances, places, or occurrences in the law text. Epistemic cues come from the reader's prior knowledge of legal concepts, processes, and terminology. For example, understanding Miranda rights requires prior knowledge of constitutional protections for accused individuals.

Temporal cues help place information, events, or actions within a logical chronological process. Chronal cues indicate the process or chronology of a referent's speech or action, while perichronal cues relate to the timing or process of other textual elements. For example,

in the assault case in Binh Duong, defendant Ly Van L repeatedly and brutally assaulted his wife over an extended period.

Legal language understanding is improved by recognizing and using contextual and temporal cues, as emphasized by Talmy's theoretical framework. These cues help readers construct a comprehensive context, prioritize relevant information, and resolve uncertainties, facilitating coherent interpretations of complex legal material. Recognizing and using these cues is crucial for legal practitioners, academics, and students to efficiently navigate and extract valuable information from complex legal papers.

### **3.2. Step of attention allocation**

This section aims to investigate how readers distribute their attentional resources when understanding legal texts. Specific factors like cue salience, individual variations in cognitive capacities, and the contextual support offered by the text itself are highlighted, along with how these factors affect how effective the attention allocation process is within Talmy's three-step framework.

#### *3.2.1. Cue salience in reading comprehension of legal texts*

Contextual cues are crucial in legal documents, helping readers focus and understand detailed information. They are influenced by factors like placement, linguistic attributes, and the reader's expectations and knowledge. In Vietnamese indictments, more noticeable cues are more noticeable, and understanding these cues is crucial for navigating complex legal situations.

In the Da Nang case, the salient lexical cues of defendant Tran Thi D and her embezzlement of over 5 billion VND from her company immediately capture the reader's attention, identifying the key individual and the specific criminal act involved. The temporal cue from 2019-2021 and the environmental cue in Da Nang provide additional contextual information, further enhancing the salience of the core details.

In the Hai Phong case, the salient lexical cues of defendant Vu Thi F and his misappropriation of 2 billion VND from customers' accounts immediately draw the reader's attention to the key individual and the nature of the alleged crime. The temporal cue in Hai Phong and the environmental cue in Nghe An further enhance the salience of the core details.

Cues are essential in Talmy's language comprehension process, helping readers identify and prioritize relevant information. In legal interactions, increasing cue prominence can improve the navigation of complex documents. Legal professionals, educators, and researchers can use tactics like unambiguous language, strategically placing important information, and effective formatting to enhance cue salience and direct readers' focus toward the most important components.

#### *3.2.2. Individual factors in reading comprehension of legal texts*

Individual factors like cognitive aptitude and personal attributes significantly impact readers' attentional allocation during comprehension. Working memory capacity is crucial



for understanding written language, as it stores and manipulates information temporarily. Individuals with higher working memory capacity can efficiently allocate attention to relevant cues and maintain a coherent understanding of legal text's significance throughout the reading process.

Consider the following excerpt from an indictment:

*In the drug trafficking case occurring in 5/2022 in the Quang Ninh border area, defendant Pham Van E was caught red-handed smuggling 5kg of crystal methamphetamine across the border. (CTR4)*

Individuals with higher working memory capacity are better at remembering and incorporating cues while reading, such as contextual information and linguistic clues. Prior knowledge and experience also influence attention distribution. However, personal constraints and specific situations can impede focus distribution, making legal experts able to create tactics tailored to readers' proficiency levels to enhance their comprehension of complex legal papers. To illustrate further, consider this excerpt from a fraud case indictment:

*In the fraud case occurring in November 2021 in Hanoi, defendant Hoang Van G deceived multiple victims by selling non-existent properties, and illegally acquiring nearly 10 billion VND. (CTR6)*

Individuals with strong working memory and understanding of fraud legislation can effectively focus on lexical cues, collateral cues, and backdrop cues to understand fraudulent acts. Factors like working memory capacity, prior knowledge, and experience significantly influence how readers allocate attention to understanding legal materials. Recognizing and dealing with these variations is crucial for maximizing attention allocation and gaining a deeper understanding of legal processes, arguments, and processes.

### 3.2.3. Contextual support in reading comprehension of legal texts

Legal texts require contextual support, which includes organization, linguistic precision, and formatting cues. Accurate and unambiguous wording in legal documents aids comprehension by allowing readers to identify and prioritize crucial information. This is especially important when the language is free from unnecessary jargon or complex terminology.

For example, in a Vietnamese legal document, the passage highlights the fraud case involving defendant Hoang Van G, who deceived multiple victims by selling non-existent properties and illegally acquiring nearly 10 billion VND. The systematic organization, thorough formatting, and stylistic emphasis provide additional reinforcement. The writing style offers clear, concise language without unnecessary legal jargon, enabling readers to understand the intended message.

In a rape case, the use of concise language, explicit mention of the crime, temporal cues, location, and clear identification of the accused defendant Dang Van H and the victim

contribute to strong contextual support. This facilitates the effective allocation of attention to critical details.

Legal documents can enhance their semantic processing by providing powerful contextual assists through structured formats, emphasis cues, and unambiguous language. This attention allocation is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of complex legal terminology concepts, processes, and arguments. This skill is crucial for legal practitioners, academics, and students, as it helps them develop a comprehensive understanding of complex legal concepts.

### **3.3. Step of semantic integration**

This section aims to investigate the semantic integration phase of Talmy's three-step legal text comprehension process. It looks at how readers integrate specified referents into linguistic forms to derive intended meanings and arguments within the legal context. It also looks at how they resolve ambiguities, develop coherent interpretations, and account for pragmatic issues.

#### **3.3.1. Resolving ambiguities**

Legal texts can be challenging to understand due to the intricacies of legal vocabulary, creating uncertainties in determining the intended meaning. To address these uncertainties, readers must use strategies and contextual cues. Lexical signals, such as the phrase "violently snatched a handbag from the victim before fleeing" in a robbery case, can provide valuable insights into the intended meaning.

Collateral cues, such as targetive cues and reader-focus cues, help clarify uncertainties. For example, in a bank employee misappropriation case, the collateral cue bank employee provides descriptive details about the accused's role, while the targetive cue 2 billion VND offers specificity about the amount involved.

Background cues, including environmental and epistemic signals, are crucial for resolving ambiguity. Environmental cues come from the specific context presented in the text, while epistemic cues derive from the reader's preexisting knowledge and familiarity with legal concepts.

Temporal cues, such as chroral and perichronal cues, help situate events within a specific context, resolving uncertainties. In legal texts, readers interpret ambiguous language by skillfully combining lexical, collateral, background, and temporal signals. Talmy's theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of resolving ambiguities and developing coherent interpretations for efficient semantic integration. This skill is vital for legal professionals, scholars, and readers, leading to more precise and reliable interpretations of the law.

#### **3.3.2. Constructing coherent interpretations**

Pragmatics is a field that examines how language use and interpretation are influenced by context and situational elements. It is crucial for understanding intended meanings, creating coherent understandings, and resolving ambiguities in legal discourse. It identifies

speech acts and their communicative goals, such as assertions, demands, or queries, which convey unique pragmatic implications. For example, the verb phrase organized gambling operations in an indictment passage asserts the defendant's involvement in illegal acts, while the phrase sexually assaulted in a rape case demonstrates the accused's participation in a sexual offense.

Pragmatic considerations also include identifying presuppositions and shared prior knowledge needed for efficient legal communication. For example, in a robbery case, the term robbery is used to refer to an individual officially accused of committing a crime. Recognizing these presuppositions helps in understanding the legal proceedings and the roles of the individuals involved.

Talmy's framework emphasizes the importance of pragmatics in semantic integration, stating that understanding legal language requires integrating contextual and pragmatic information alongside linguistic structures. This approach helps resolve uncertainty, create coherent interpretations, and integrate meaning within legal systems. By acknowledging and utilizing pragmatic factors like speech acts, implicatures, and presuppositions, one can gain precise understanding and logical interpretations and resolve legal uncertainties, making it essential for legal practitioners and students.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The study examines Talmy's three-step model for identifying and integrating referents in legal texts, with a specific focus on the role of contextual cues and their interconnections. The study used qualitative content analysis of Vietnamese criminal indictments to determine the primary components that influence cue detection, attention allocation, and semantic integration. The study showed that it is important to accurately identify and combine lexical, collateral, background, and temporal signals to make mental models that make sense and match legal interpretations. Cue salience, individual cognitive skills, and contextual support greatly influence the efficiency of attention allocation and disambiguation of pragmatic elements during semantic integration. The findings offer theoretical insights into the intricate interaction between Talmy's cognitive phases and their contextual variables within the legal field. The study also showcases the effectiveness of qualitative content analysis in systematically analyzing several cue categories in legal case scenarios. The findings enhance our understanding of the complex cognitive processes involved in interpreting legal texts. They are also important for advancing theoretical knowledge, improving research methods, and implementing practical strategies in the legal area.

❖ **Conflict of Interest:** Author have no conflict of interest to declare

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## ỨNG DỤNG QUÁ TRÌNH BA BƯỚC CỦA TALMY CHO VIỆC ĐỌC HIỂU VĂN BẢN PHÁP LÝ

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### TÓM TẮT

Nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích nâng cao khả năng đọc hiểu các văn bản pháp lý thông qua việc áp dụng quá trình ba bước của Talmy (2017) để xác định và tích hợp các đối tượng tham chiếu từ các tín hiệu ngữ cảnh ban đầu vào các cấu trúc ngôn ngữ. Dựa trên ngữ dụng học, phân tích diễn ngôn, ngữ nghĩa tri nhận và khái niệm động lực của Talmy, phân tích nội dung định tính được sử dụng để nghiên cứu các quá trình nhận thức mà người đọc sử dụng để xác định các tín hiệu trong văn bản, phân bổ sự tập trung và khả năng tích hợp ngữ nghĩa từ các tín hiệu đó khi đọc các bản cáo trạng. Dữ liệu từ 10 bản cáo trạng tiếng Việt bao gồm các tội danh hình sự khác nhau cho phép phân tích sự phân bổ và tương tác của các loại tín hiệu như tín hiệu từ vựng, tín hiệu mô tả, tín hiệu chủ cảnh và tín hiệu thời gian để hiểu cách là xem những tín hiệu này tạo điều kiện thuận lợi hoặc cản trở quá trình đọc hiểu hiểu. Kết quả nghiên cứu làm sáng tỏ các cơ chế nhận thức trong việc hiểu cáo trạng pháp lý và xác định các yếu tố cải thiện hoặc làm giảm hiệu quả của quá trình đọc hiểu. Cuối cùng, nghiên cứu nhằm mục đích nâng cao khả năng của người làm công tác pháp lý trong việc sử dụng hiệu quả các tín hiệu ngữ cảnh khi diễn giải các quá trình, quy định và lập luận pháp lý dưới dạng văn bản, từ đó nâng cao độ chính xác và hiệu quả trong việc hiểu các văn bản pháp lý, đặc biệt là những văn bản bằng tiếng Anh hoặc ngôn ngữ nước ngoài.

**Từ khóa:** ngữ nghĩa tri nhận; động lực; văn bản pháp lý; xác định đối tượng tham chiếu