

7-1-1993

Dahl's Law Dictionary. Diccionario Jurídico by Henry S. Dahl

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Recommended Citation

Alejandro M. Garro, *Dahl's Law Dictionary. Diccionario Jurídico* by Henry S. Dahl, 24 U. Miami Inter-Am. L. Rev. 625 (1993)
Available at: <http://repository.law.miami.edu/umialr/vol24/iss3/9>

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DAHL'S LAW DICTIONARY. *DICCIONARIO JURÍDICO*. By Henry S. Dahl, Buffalo, New York: William S. Hein & Co., Inc., 1992. pp. 350.

*Reviewed by Alejandro M. Garro**

As those experienced in multinational legal research know, legal translation requires an extremely high degree of competence. The difficulty of translation is compounded by the contrasting legal systems and their respective language and specialized vocabulary. Thus, the complexities involved in the elaboration of a legal dictionary that aspires to go beyond a brief glossary are beyond the abilities of all but the most sophisticated comparative legal scholars. The problem is that the most accomplished comparativists are more likely to devote their talents and energies to a series of monographs, a book, or a multi-volume treatise on the subject matter of their choice, rather than devoting many years of their lives to the painstaking job of preparing a comprehensive legal dictionary.

Dahl's English-Spanish/Spanish-English legal dictionary does not appear to have scholarly pretensions. However, it provides both the non-specialist and comparative lawyers in general with a well-organized, useful, and reliable reference tool for assistance in Spanish and English legal terminology.

Henry S. Dahl, now a practicing attorney based in Dallas, has been exposed to different legal systems throughout his legal training in countries as varied as Argentina, Great Britain, and Russia. In addition to being admitted to the bars of both common and civil law jurisdictions, he has had the privilege of teaching law at various times in Puerto Rico, Louisiana, and Texas. Significantly, each of the legal systems of these jurisdictions has been influenced, to a greater or lesser extent, by Spanish law. Thus, Mr. Dahl's own experience as a practitioner and teacher is testimony to the internationalization of legal practice. It evinces the growth and importance of comparative legal studies and the resulting need for improved reference tools.

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Two kinds of definitions appear in Dahl's legal dictionary. Strings of synonyms are used to explain some words and phrases, while "authoritative" statutory text, judicial decisions, or doctrinal statements are employed to explain the meanings of other, more nebulous words and phrases. This latter feature offers a comparative advantage, particularly to those who are persuaded that the shades of meaning of legal terms are best understood and appreciated by the context in which they are inserted. Notably, Dahl conveniently presents these definitions in an eminently readable typeface and organizes the voices in clear and lucid fashion.

For the English reader, the meanings of Spanish legal terms are described through contextual transcription of five Spanish codes (civil, commercial, criminal, civil procedural, and criminal procedural). The transcriptions are taken from a 1901 English translation of Spanish codes of the 19th century. Although many texts are obviously outdated, Dahl alerts the reader at the outset that the purpose of the dictionary is to explain the meaning of terms and not to serve as a tool of research on current law. In addition to the Spanish codes, the definitions are often explained through contextual references to the Civil Code of Louisiana, to a recent edition of a Standard Penal Code for Latin America, or to decisions handed down by the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico, expanding on the meaning of legal terms incorporated into the Spanish Civil Code.

For the Spanish reader, the U.S. Constitution, the Uniform Commercial Code, the Federal Rules of Civil and Criminal Procedure, and the Restatements (Conflicts of Laws, Contracts, Judgments, and Torts) provide the contextual basis to aid in the comprehension of English and Anglo-American legal terminology. Additionally, the author employs decisions of the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico to express abstract Continental legal concepts in straightforward English words.

Dahl's Spanish-English legal dictionary also has its weaknesses. Close scrutiny of the long list of words and terms chosen to be included reveals some lacunae. Most important, his dictionary does not define certain words, phrases, and peculiar expressions that, in some instances, are essential to distinguish Spanish from Spanish-American legal usage. However, for this reviewer Dahl's legal dictionary offers a distinct advantage by making possible a contextual understanding of the word or phrase whose meaning we seek to ascertain. This is possible only because the author chose to

adopt the sensible format of explaining a given term against the background of statutory language, judicial decisions, and scholarly opinions. Is this not the current methodology of our language and acquisition process to grasp the contours of the vocabulary we use in our own legal system?