EventsMatter: Event Annotation Guidelines

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Abstract

The analysis of court decisions and associated events is part of the daily life of many legal practitioners. Unfortunately, court decisions can often be long and complex, stating all types of facts relating to a case, which makes reading and understanding them a time-consuming task. Automated court decision timeline generation could provide a visual overview of what happened throughout a case by representing the main legal events, together with relevant temporal information. A necessary first step is to develop tools and technologies that can extract events from court decisions. Towards this end, we compare the effectiveness of three different extraction mechanisms, namely deep learning, conditional random fields, and rule-based, when it comes to the extraction of events and their components (i.e., the event type, who was involved, and when it happened). To this aim, we created a corpus of manually annotated decisions of the European Court of Human Rights, which serves as a gold standard not only for our experiments, but also for the research community for comparison and further experimentation. This document exposes the guidelines for this corpus annotation, including also the main decisions taken and some cases of interest.

1 Introduction

This document gives specific focus to guidelines used for the annotation of the corpus used in the work *Event Matters: Extraction of Events in Court Decisions*. The remainder is structured as follows. We describe the corpus, the statistics therein, and the annotation methodology, alongside with the guidelines agreed among the annotators. Finally we provide some examples of blurred cases that the annotators found throughout the annotation process.

2 Description of the corpus

2.1 The Corpus

The corpus consists of 30 decisions of the ECHR extracted from the HUDOC[1] database. The ECHR decisions were chosen because they contain: i) different types of time-related events concerning different actors, in comparison with the decisions of the Court of Justice

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[1] https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/

of the EU; and ii) a standard (but not fixed) structure in which different legal events are embedded. ECHR decisions are divided into several sections containing specific information according to Rule 74 of the Rules of the Court:

The ECHR decisions generally include the following structural sections (according to Rule 74 of the Rules of the Court):

- Preamble

- The facts, with the identification of the parties;

  - The circumstances of the case: the equivalent to the "background of the case" in other courts, such as the European Court of Justice. Refers to a summary of the submissions of the parties comprising their main legal arguments;
  - Relevant domestic law. It encompasses provisions of domestic law, and/or other pertinent international or European treaties.

- Complaints

  - The Law. It comprises the merit of the case, and, i.e., meaning the reasons in "point of law" articulated by the Court and operative provisions thereof. Herein are stated the alleged violation(s) of the article(s) of the Convention.
  - Remaining Complaints

- Decision

The *Preamble* and the *Introduction* are followed by *Facts*, which contain information about the formal procedure and the circumstances of the case providing details about what happened. The following *Law* section describes the legal situations and states the alleged violation(s). The document concludes with the *Decision* section. In this work we do not take into account all the sections. For the purposes of this paper, we use the mentioned document structure excluding the *Law* section and focus on the procedure, circumstances and decision.

2.2 Corpus statistics

In this section we expose the main numbers of the corpus: it has 66970 tokens, amounting to 2232,33 in average per document.

- Number of event tokens: 615 tokens, 20,5 tokens in average per document.

- In procedure events: 294 tokens, 9,8 tokens in average per document.

- In circumstance events: 320 tokens, 10,67 tokens in average per document.

Regarding the event components, the statistics of the corpus are the following:

- What: 721 tokens, 24,03 tokens in average per document.

- When: 528 tokens, 17,6 tokens in average per document.

- Who: 418 tokens, 13,93 tokens in average per document.

3 Annotation methodology and guidelines

The corpus was annotated by two legal experts in several iterations using the software GATE [2]. The experts annotated independently and then met with a third person to reach a consensus on the disagreements. The original annotations of both annotators are available in the corpus so that differences can be consulted. In this work, as we focus on event extraction aimed to automated court decision timeline generation, we were interested in information that is relevant to searching for or extracting time-related information, such as events, processes, temporal information, and the parties involved. As time-related events of cases are linguistically expressed, we annotated the most salient candidate passages thereof. In the following section we explain the annotated methodology, the specific guidelines supporting the annotation task and finally, we present some examples of difficult annotations.

3.1 Annotation methodology

Judgments were manually annotated following the frame "who-when-core event". To illustrate the applicability thereof, we make use of an annotated paragraph of the case Altay v. Turkey (no. 2), no. 11236/09, 9 April 2019 (a case referring to respect of private life):

> "On 29 May 2008 the applicant lodged an application with the Edirne Enforcement Court for the restriction on the conversations between him and his lawyer to be lifted."

"Who" corresponds to the subject of the event, which can either be a subject, but also an object (i.e., an application); in the example, the subject is "(the) applicant";

"When" refers to the date of the event, or to any temporal reference thereto, and a reference of other event (e.g., *After the death of the widow, X happened*. In the paragraph considered, the "when" is the "29 May 2008";

"Core event" usually corresponds to the main verb reflecting the baseline of all the paragraph (which in this case is "lodged"); additionally, we include thereto a *complementing* verb or object whenever the core verb is not self-explicit or requires an extension to attain a sufficient meaning of the core event; in the paragraph considered, the core event is "lodged an application". Another e.g. is "dismiss an action".

"Related event" relates to the extent of text containing contextual event-related information. The *type* of such annotations can be either *circumstance* – meaning that the event correspond to the facts under judgment; or *procedure*– wherein the event belongs to the procedural dimension of the case. This includes court procedures (legal proceedings stricto sensu), but also actions that trigger procedural effects. A further analysis of this distinction can be found in previous literature. In the paragraph at stake, we annotated the related event "with the Edirne Enforcement Court for the restriction on the conversations between

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[2]https://gate.ac.uk/gate/

him and his lawyer to be lifted" as procedure.

3.2   Guidelines

In addition to the event components described in the former section, we have annotated related-time events with concrete guidelines shown below:

Extension of core event.   One core event can also include two close-related verbs, e.g. "divorced" and "agree on custody", instead of annotating two connected verbs autonomously. Moreover, whenever there is some entailment between events, we annotate merely one, e.g."they drink water and they felt unwell".

Repeated events.   When there is reference to an event happening in several dates (e.g. three applicants and their dates of birth, respectively), we annotate solely one event as the core, and count with one annotation that covers all the related dates.

Non-dated events.   Events that are not dated, though semantically expressing their time-frame, are then annotated under "when", for example, the time expressions as "the same date", "this afternoon", "on unspecified dates", "number of occasions".

Non-annotated events.   Some events were not considered relevant to be depicted in a timeline, and therefore not annotated, e.g. the fact that *X was born in X* seemed irrelevant.

Factuality.   Events that are named but do not occur, are yet annotated, but they are marked under "factuality" feature to be distinguished, but not included in the timeline. When events are negated, this feature equals to "NOT", for instance, a party does not appeal against a decision.

Importance.   In some cases, the annotators did not agree on adding or deleting an event from the annotation in the consensus round. When this happened, the event (considered as relevant by just one of the annotators) was marked with the feature *importance:L* (from *low*).

Furthermore, other tips were taken into account during the annotation process and are here illustrated:

- The first and last events in a case are always annotated the same:

  - First event (exposing the applicant and the information of the case): always follows the structure "The case originated in an/**N application(s)** (no. X) against X **lodged** (...) by (...), on **DD MM YYYY**". There can be one or several applicants, and therefore one or several dates. In all the cases, the dates will be the *when*, lodged will be the *what* and *application* or *# applications* will be the *who*.

– Last event (exposing the final decision): the *who* is THE COURT, the *what* are the different decisions (one *what* annotation each, separately), the event goes from "FOR THESE REASONS, THE COURT" to the last sentence before the signatures.

- Not to annotate irrelevant determiners (*the, a*) at the beginning of the *who* event component.

- When we have a mention to an event that happens several times: ONE annotation for the core and ONE annotation that covers all the dates.

- The *what* annotation can be discontinuous in an event, and can encompass several verbs if they are the result of the same action (e.g., *The Court* **communicated the decision** *in September 2010,* **upholding the previous judgment.**.

- Events that do not happen are annotated but they are marked with *factuality* feature to be distinguished and not included in the timeline.

3.3 Examples of difficult annotations

During the annotation process, some events were difficult to tag, and others sparked discussion about how to do it, challenging the stipulated guidelines and evidencing how complex and subjective annotating tasks can be. Herewith we show some annotations that triggered discussion on the type of events procedure/circumstance. We transcribe the respective disputable cases and then comment on the achieved consensus.

Procedural types of related events.

-"On 1 August 2000 the Ministry of the Interior of Belarus ordered the applicant's arrest on suspicion of her having committed several criminal offences".

-"On 28 March 2014 the Town Court extended the applicant's detention until 18 August 2014".

-"On 20 August and 21 September 2015 the investigative committee of the Republic of Belarus discontinued the criminal proceedings against the applicant".

-(STANA Case) "The applicant complained before the domestic courts about the lawfulness of the interception of his phone conversation and the accuracy of the transcript. However, the High Court merely replied that the impugned interception had been lawful and within the scope of Law no. 51/1991."

In the cases shown, the events does not refer to a court procedure per se, though it triggers legal procedural effects.

Circumstantial types of related events:

-(HOINESS Case)"In August and September 2010 the applicant lodged two complaints with the Press Complaints Commission (Pressens Faglige Utvalg) against two publications owned and controlled by Mr Trygve Hegnar: the weekly and daily business newspapers Kapital and Finansavisen";

-(STANA Case) "On 20 February 2003 the applicant, a bank manager at that time, was placed in pre-trial detention by the Bucharest Anti-Corruption Department of the Prosecutor's Office, on a charge of taking a bribe in order to favourably influence the acceptance of a loan requested by M.G.";

-(MURUZHEVA Case): "On 17 November 2014 the Sunzhenskiy District Bailiffs' Service in the Republic of Ingushetiya refused to institute enforcement proceedings since the debtor, R.M., resided in Moscow".

In the cases shown, the event corresponds to the facts under judgment. In these statements, we are not aware of the actual jurisdictional competence of the local system relative to the case ("Press Complaints Commission", the "Bucharest Anti-Corruption Department of the Prosecutor's Office", or the "Sunzhenskiy District Bailiffs' Service") to qualify as procedural type event.

"On 26 February 2014 the Deputy Town Prosecutor carried out an inspection of remand prison SIZO-6".

The issue herein is the semantics attributed to the role "Town Prosecutor" which renders the idea of being a magistrate, though the function here refers to an inspection task, without procedural effect.

"On 26 February 2014 the Deputy Town Prosecutor carried out an inspection of remand prison SIZO-6".

The issue relates to the semantics attributed to the role "Deputy Town Prosecutor", rendering the idea of being a court magistrate, though the function herein refers to an inspection task, without a procedural effect.

(VISY Case) "The applicant claims, and this has not been disputed by the Government, that the media to be returned to the applicant contained, inter alia, legal advice protected by lawyer-client privilege".

The verb used "claims" means "argues", not referring to a legal procedural action.

(KOSAITE Case) "According to publicly available information, after the death of a baby born at home in June 2011, the police started a criminal investigation".

The paragraph refers to the starting of a criminal action, not of a procedural court event.