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MKHITAR GOSH'S GIRQ DATASTANI IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL SEMANTICS

Introduction

Integrating traditional linguistic studies of the human mind with computational modeling has become increasingly important in contemporary research. The two domains have developed unevenly: computational approaches have advanced rapidly through technological innovation, while the study of language and cognition continues to depend on qualitative, human-centered analysis. At the turn of the twenty-first century, this imbalance led many to underestimate the relevance of linguistic inquiry to the study of intelligence. Today, however, artificial intelligence and large language models reveal the limits of purely computational reasoning. They demonstrate that generating meaning from minimal datasets yields only partial or superficial results, and that these results are explicitly biased. In other words, intelligence—whether human or artificial—emerges from detail, from the depth of linguistic, cultural, and contextual embedding that machines alone cannot replicate.

Cultural categorization refers to the cognitive and institutional processes through which a society organizes the constituents of its world—people, actions, objects, and even abstract notions such as justice or kinship—into identifiable classes. These groupings are not arbitrary: they are shaped by shared cosmologies, historical circumstances, religious beliefs, and linguistic structures. Categories do not merely describe reality—they construct it through cultural activity, where culture (cf. Latin verb colo – Arm. քաղել) denotes the selective and pragmatic human practices situated within specific contexts and environments. Categories delineate who belongs and who does not; what counts as property and what is sacred; what is acceptable, excusable, punishable, or morally exemplary. They represent the accumulated knowledge of things—stored, transmitted, and reorganized within human consciousness.

Ontology, by contrast, addresses what a culture assumes to exist. The Greek word ontos (ὄντως) is an adverb meaning "real" (cf. Arm. է, էական, էություն). In classical philosophy, ontology is the study of being. In cultural and legal anthropology, however, it is understood more broadly as the

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[3] Mkhtar Gosh's Girq Datastani was included in the list of documentary heritage inscribed on the Memory of the World International Register in 2025.

embedded framework of reality: the entities a culture regards as real or consequential and the ways they are related. In contemporary computational sciences, ontology assumes a formalized structure—taxonomies of knowledge and hierarchical classification systems—but even these carry implicit cultural assumptions. While cultural categorization reflects the lived embeddedness of social practice, ontology provides the conceptual scaffolding upon which those practices rest [Fonseca, 2007].

These two—cultural categorization and ontology—are not separate domains but mutually dependent. The act of categorizing is itself an ontological operation, while ontological beliefs are continually reproduced and reinforced through evolving systems of classification and interpretation.

Although arts, crafts, communication, and economic life depend heavily on technological progress, human relationships are still grounded in enduring principles of justice, ethics, and moral responsibility established in the earliest stages of civilization. Concepts such as right and duty, crime and punishment, compensation and reconciliation have changed little in essence, even as the conditions of social life have transformed.

This interdependent relationship finds one of its clearest expressions in legal systems—especially in those that arise not from colonial imposition or modern positivism but from indigenous and premodern traditions that embody profound cultural cosmologies. Among these, the Law Code of Mkhitar Gosh stands as a remarkable example. It not only regulated the moral and social order of medieval Armenian life but also articulated an Armenian-Christian ontology in legal text.

The objective of this study is to investigate Mkhitar Gosh's Girk' Datastani as a structured expression of cultural categorization and legal ontology, demonstrating how its internal logic may inform contemporary approaches to the modeling of knowledge in digital humanities. By interpreting the *Girk' Datastani* as both a linguistic and epistemological system, the research seeks to reveal its potential as a conceptual framework for representing complex semantic relations in modern ontology-based environments. Beyond its historical and legal importance, Gosh's code serves as a foundational corpus for developing methodologies that enhance the digital visibility of low-resource languages such as Armenian, linking the interpretive traditions of medieval scholarship with present-day efforts in computational representation and cultural preservation. Through this perspective, the Girk' Datastani is positioned not only as a legal monument but also as an epistemological anchor for inclusive digital knowledge systems.

Methodology

Digital semantics is the interdisciplinary study of how meaning is represented, transmitted, and interpreted within digital environments. It bridges linguistics, philosophy, computer science, and information theory to explore how language and knowledge are encoded for computational use. At its core, digital semantics examines the relationship between signs, data structures, and meaning, seeking to model the interpretive processes that enable machines to "understand" or simulate human understanding. While semantics in traditional linguistics studies meaning in context, digital semantics formalizes meaning through symbolic representations, ontologies, and metadata schemas that can be processed algorithmically. By codifying meaning as data, digital semantics allows interoperability across platforms, disciplines, and languages, enabling heterogeneous systems to share and reason about information consistently.

Philosophically, digital semantics extends classical semiotic and ontological inquiry into computational domains. It inherits from Aristotle's categories, Frege's logic, and Saussure's sign theory but translates their insights into data architectures. Meaning is no longer solely a mental or linguistic construct—it becomes an operational attribute of digital systems. This transformation,

however, introduces both possibilities and tensions [Fonseca, 2007]. However, while machines can simulate semantic relationships through statistical or logical models, their "understanding" remains dependent on human-defined ontologies and linguistic corpora. Hence, digital semantics always embodies cultural and epistemological assumptions: what is represented reflects decisions about what counts as meaningful or real.

In the humanities, it supports the encoding of complex entities such as historical concepts, artworks, or legal codes, preserving their internal relationships rather than reducing them to keywords. By linking contextual metadata with textual or multimodal content, digital semantics transforms archives into dynamic knowledge ecosystems. In artificial intelligence, it guides the interpretive layer that connects symbolic reasoning with neural models, ensuring that computational outputs remain aligned with humanly meaningful categories.

Ethically and epistemologically, digital semantics entails a responsibility to design inclusive and transparent systems that reflect the plurality of human knowledge. In this sense, it is not only a technical discipline but also a humanistic one—concerned with how meaning, identity, and power are inscribed into data infrastructures.

This study explores how cultural categorization operates within digitized ontologies in Mkhitar Gosh's *Girk' Datastani* (Law Code). It is essential first to clarify what each concept means and how they intersect. This section establishes a conceptual and methodological foundation for the study by defining the two terms, explaining their analytical distinctions, and showing why their interrelation is central to the interpretation of legal and linguistic systems.

The *Girk' Datastani* has been the subject of sustained scholarly attention from both Armenian and international researchers, including Varag Arakelyan (1964), Grigor Hakobyan (1967), Khosrov Torosyan (1975, 1982), Levon Khachikyan (1953, 1979), Ruben Avagyan (2001, 2015), and Robert Thomson (2000). Their analyses, editions, and translations have collectively illuminated the historical, linguistic, and juridical dimensions of Gosh's text and positioned it along with the canon of medieval Christian legal thought.

Cultural categorization refers to the processes through which a community organizes its experience of the world into distinct, meaningful classes. These groupings emerge through language, institutions, and shared practices that assign symbolic, moral, or functional value to objects, persons, and actions. While material characteristics may provide the initial basis for classification, culture reorders and interprets them in light of local meanings, cosmologies, and social priorities. As Bowker and Star famously observed in *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (1999), classification systems are not neutral but socially and politically charged structures that shape how knowledge, institutions, and individuals interact. Through examples, they reveal how categories embed values, construct visibility, and marginalize certain experiences. Once institutionalized, such classifications form powerful infrastructures that organize social life while remaining largely invisible. By introducing concepts such as "boundary objects" and "torque," Bowker and Star emphasize the ethical responsibility to recognize and critically examine these hidden systems of ordering and their lasting cultural consequences. Cultural categories operate simultaneously at several interdependent levels. Linguistically, they are expressed through naming practices that carry semantic and emotional weight. Institutionally, they are formalized through law, ritual, and social hierarchy. Cognitively and epistemically, they guide what is acknowledged as legitimate knowledge. These dimensions reinforce one another to form a coherent cultural logic.

Ontology, in contrast, addresses the question of what a culture assumes to exist and how it understands the relationships among these entities. The term derives from the Greek ontos (ὄντως, "real") and, in the philosophical tradition, refers to the study of being. In anthropological and cultural

analysis, however, ontology is understood more expansively—as the background framework of existence that structures how people perceive reality and engage with it. In the context of information science, ontology has acquired an additional, applied meaning. It now refers to formal frameworks or taxonomies used to organize data and define relationships between entities [Guarino, 1998]. Computational ontology's structure is what can be represented or retrieved in a digital system. Although this technical sense appears remote from cultural inquiry, the two share an important methodological link: both determine what counts as real and relevant within a particular system of knowledge. As Fonseca states in "The Double Role of Ontologies in Information Science Research" (2007), ontologies serve two intertwined purposes: as engineering tools for structuring data and as scientific instruments for studying how knowledge is organized and understood. He emphasizes that ontologies are not merely technical artifacts but conceptual frameworks reflecting human interpretation and social context. Fonseca highlights their capacity to bridge computational representation with epistemological inquiry, enabling both interoperability among information systems and a deeper understanding of meaning construction. Fonseca cautions, researchers must remain aware of whether they are speaking about ontologies of a world (philosophical) or ontologies for organizing information (computational), since conflating these senses leads to analytical confusion.

In cultural and legal studies, ontology sets the limits of the conceivable. It determines what kinds of beings—divine, human, or symbolic—are recognized as actors, and what relations among them are deemed meaningful. Although ontology and categorization can be distinguished conceptually, they are inseparable in practice. Categorization operationalizes abstract ontologies, translating a culture's assumptions about existence into conceptual structures of consciousness. Conversely, repeated acts of classification reinforce and stabilize ontological beliefs [Foucault, 1970]. The reciprocal relationship between ontology and categorization can also be seen in translation and interpretation. When Gosh's legal categories are rendered into modern languages or computational models, the ontological premises embedded in his terms risk being diluted or lost. Treating *Girk' Datastani* merely as a codified legal text risks overlooking its deeper intellectual architecture. The code is, in essence, an ontological map of its time. It delineates a hierarchy of beings—divine, human, and institutional—and orders them according to principles of justice rooted in Christian-Armenian cosmology. Every law, category, and distinction reveal a cultural stance on what exists, what matters, and how moral balance is to be maintained.

By clarifying ontology and cultural categorization as methodological tools, represented in digital reality as OWL and SKOS, this study approaches Gosh's text as both a legal system and a conceptual framework of existence. The task is not only to analyze the content of its laws but also to reconstruct the worldview they enact. In this way, ontology and categorization become more than theoretical concepts: they are instruments for understanding how medieval Armenian society imagined the structure of being itself; they provide conceptual frameworks for language models, a factor which, in the case of endangered and low-resource languages, is of vital significance.

Results: The Interdependence of Ontology and Cultural Categorization in Mkhitar Gosh's Girk' Datastani

The textual and comparative analysis of Mkhitar Gosh's *Girk' Datastani* demonstrates that the code reflects a systematic interaction between ontological assumptions and legal categorization. The legal classifications recorded in the text function as structured expressions of an Armenian-Christian worldview that unites theological, moral, and social dimensions. The results summarized below are

based on a textual study of primary sources and on interpretations found in verified scholarly editions and commentaries [Torosyan, 1975; Thomson, 2000; Avagyan, 2001; Ghazaryan, 2014; Hovhannisyan, 2018].

Ontology of the Law Code

The *Girk' Datastani* is organized within a tripartite ontological framework encompassing divine, ecclesiastical, and secular authority. Each sphere operates under the same theological premise that justice originates in divine order and is replicated in human legislation [Thomson, 2000; Ghazaryan, 2014]. This layered structure situates moral transgression and social offense within a single continuum of sin and responsibility. The scheme below represents a sample ontology of the property law clauses included in Mkhitar Gosh's Law Code.
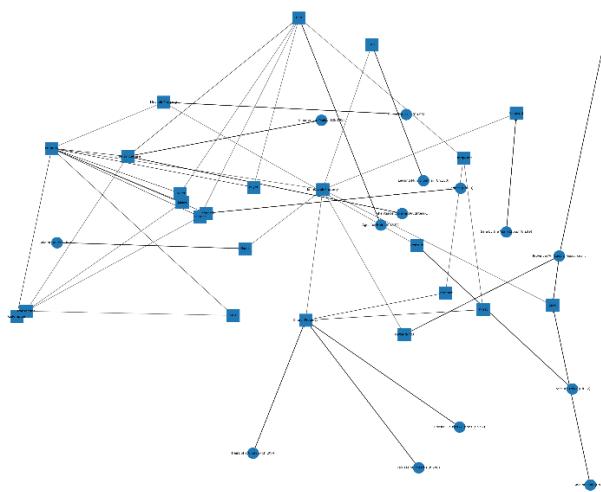

Figure 1. The OWL of Property Law

Legal Categorization and Its Operational Role

The internal organization of the *Girk' Datastani* expresses its ontology through a set of culturally specific legal categories. **The chapters represented in Figures 1 and 2 (curated Property Law set) are as follows. Sales/Redemption/Leases:** Ch. 90–92, 98–101, 100 (mills), 83 (pledges), 31 (resources & water rights), 32 (treasure-trove). Evidence in Thomson's translation: land/house sales and redemption (Ch. 90–92); pledges (Ch. 83); vessels, crop futures, mills (Ch. 98–100). **Inheritance:** Ch. 101 (males); Ch. 180 (sons & daughters); Ch. 181 (ages for heirs); Church heirs/property (Ch. 207–208). These conceptual patterns demonstrate that categorization in the Girk' Datastani transforms abstract moral values into legal operations.
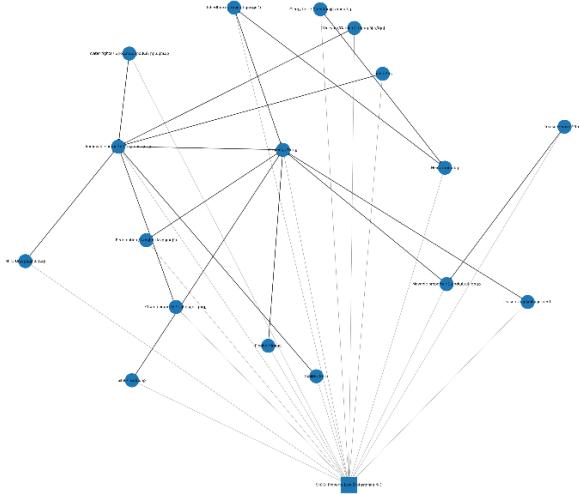
Figure 2. The SKOS of Property Law

Correlation Between the Law Code's Ontology and Categorization

A direct correlation emerges between the Code's theological hierarchy and its legal organization. Each principal section—those concerning the clergy, laity, property, and transgression—rests on assumptions about human nature, moral agency, and divine justice. For example, Gosh's distinction between meghk (sin) and vochkarut'iwn (crime) reveals an ontological structure that regards wrongdoing as both spiritual and civic. This correlation parallels Byzantine canon law models, yet Gosh reinterprets them through Armenian theological idioms [Torosyan, 1975; Thomson, 2000]. The evidence supports the conclusion that Armenian legal ontology, as reflected in the Code, developed independently of Roman law traditions while maintaining conceptual coherence with Christian metaphysics.

Lexical analysis of the Armenian text shows that legal terminology overlaps with ecclesiastical and moral vocabulary. Words such as *azatagrel* (to liberate), *patarag* (liturgy) occur in both juridical and liturgical contexts, suggesting a unified linguistic framework for spiritual and civic life [Hovhannisyan, 2018]. The presence of Syriac and Greek elements—particularly in references to clerical procedure—indicates Gosh's adaptation of external legal concepts into Armenian Christian usage [Thomson, 2000].

Across the manuscript tradition, core terminology remains consistent. Differences in orthography and minor phrasing do not alter meaning. The semantic coherence of key legal categories supports Ghazaryan's (2014) argument that economic and property relations in the Code are defined by both theological principles and practical considerations.
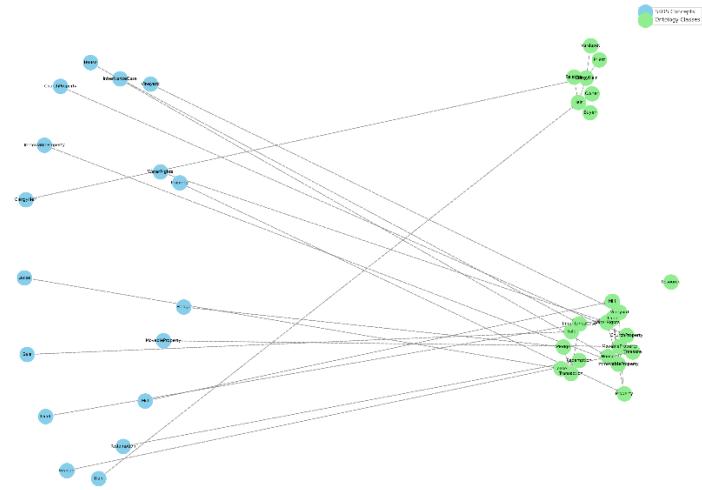
Figure 3. The correlation between SKOS and the ontology of property concepts and classes

This chart displays SKOS concept hierarchy on the left (blue) and ontology class structure on the right (green). The dashed gray lines denote skos:Concept ↔ owl:Class alignments (semantic correlations). Comparison with contemporaneous Near Eastern Christian legal systems confirms that Gosh's Code integrates regional juridical structures while maintaining distinct Armenian features. Roman-Byzantine legal forms influenced the procedural chapters, but their moral rationale derives from Armenian ecclesiastical teaching [Avagyan, 2001]. The consistency of terminology and logic across sources and commentaries [Torosyan, 1975; Thomson, 2000] demonstrates that Mkhitar Gosh's *Girk' Datastani* functioned both as a codified legal corpus and as a systematic representation of an Armenian-Christian ontology, where divine justice and social order were inseparable.

Discussion: Ontological Implications of Mkhitar Gosh's Girk' Datastani

The results of this study demonstrate that Mkhitar Gosh's *Girk' Datastani* represents more than a compilation of juridical prescriptions. It is a structured expression of the moral and ontological system that underpinned medieval Armenian society. By integrating divine law, ecclesiastical authority, and civil order into a coherent legal framework, Gosh translated theological concepts into practical governance mechanisms. The findings align with prior scholarship that situates the *Girk' Datastani* at the intersection of canon law and indigenous legal tradition [Torosyan, 1975; Thomson, 2000].

The *Girk' Datastani* establishes a consistent hierarchy of being, in which justice serves as the foundation of all juridical relations. Every law in the text implies that justice is mediated through human institutions. This ontological model precedes secular codifications that emerged in Western Europe a few decades later, where the division between civil and ecclesiastical jurisdiction became more explicit. In Gosh's system, the canonical and secular domains coexist but are topically separated, reflecting the integrative worldview characteristic of Armenian Christian thought [Bastamyants, 1898]. This feature is evident in laws addressing property, marriage, and moral transgression. Acts such as theft or adultery are treated simultaneously as social offenses and spiritual failings. The text consistently links sin (meghk) to restitution and reconciliation, showing that moral and legal correction were inseparable processes. The hierarchical layering of divine, ecclesiastical, and civil law, therefore, represents not only an institutional arrangement but an ontological statement about the nature of order in the world.

In Gosh's text, categorization thus becomes an operational expression of Armenian Christian ontology. The division between crime and sin, the differentiation of social ranks, and the moral valuation of economic relations all rest on a shared understanding of humanity's place in divine order. Through these categories, Gosh's legal reasoning extends theological anthropology into the social domain. The process of defining, judging, and compensating becomes both a civic and spiritual act, linking ontology directly to the mechanics of law. The linguistic evidence further supports the stability of this ontological-legal relationship. Classical Armenian terminology in the *Girk' Datastani* exhibits minimal variation across manuscripts and later copies, suggesting careful transmission of conceptual precision. Words with dual ecclesiastical and legal meanings—such as *azatagrel* (to liberate) or *patarag* (liturgy)—demonstrate that the legal lexicon evolved within a theological environment. This linguistic continuity indicates that medieval Armenian scribes and commentators regarded the *Girk' Datastani* not simply as a legal manual but as a canonical text uniting both religious and civic truth.

The inclusion of Greek and Syriac terms, noted by Thomson (2000), points to Gosh's synthesis of external sources with Armenian theological semantics. Despite linguistic adaptation, the conceptual framework remained intact, maintaining coherence across ecclesiastical and civil contexts. When viewed comparatively, the Armenian experience profoundly differs from contemporaneous developments in Latin and Byzantine jurisprudence. While the Nomocanon and Western canon law sharply distinguished between the religious and temporal domains, Gosh retained a unified legal ontology grounded in divine order [Torosyan, 1975; Thomson, 2000]. This integrative approach reflects the intellectual conditions of the broader Christian East, where secular law, though clearly defined, was perceived as an extension of spiritual and ethical morals. This dualistic approach is a continuation of the Armenian philosophical tradition, particularly in works by Davit Anhaght.

A broader comparative perspective situates Mkhitar Gosh's Girk' Datastani within the continuum of pre-modern legal reasoning that sought to harmonize divine authority and social order. When compared with foundational systems such as the Torah and Talmud, several conceptual convergences emerge. Both traditions integrate religious and civil law, expressing justice as a universal attribute transmitted through human institutions. Having studied and synthesized diverse precedential texts, Gosh wrote the Armenian customary law as a practical, unified textual system [Thomson, 2000] that would be consistent with the traditions of Armenian communities of the time. The resulting framework not only ordered medieval Armenian society but also provided a durable reference for later applications, including the Cilician Lawcodes of Smbat Sparapet and the inheritance statutes of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia [Pivazyan, 1960].

Finally, *Girk' Datastani's* pedagogical role confirms that medieval Armenian law operated simultaneously as theology, ethics, and jurisprudence: it was read in monasteries and schools as a manual of civic virtue. Another piece of evidence of Gosh's impact is that the Magna Carta emerged around 35 years after Gosh's *Girk' Datastani*, a period sufficient for this widely popular legal framework to spread across Europe, carried by Armenian traders who used it as a guide for settling disputes. The Magna Carta, 1215, established limits on royal authority and proclaimed the rule of law, the right to due process (which later became the basis for habeas corpus principles), protection of property, church autonomy, et c. Over time, these ideas influenced legal systems worldwide, including the U.S. Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In this light, the *Girk' Datastani* may be viewed as part of the broader global intellectual effort to articulate the order of justice—a vision in which universal principle, moral duty, and social harmony coalesce.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Mkhitar Gosh's *Girk' Datastani* is more than a codification of laws; it is a dynamic ontological model articulating how justice, morality, and social order were conceived in medieval Armenian thought. By examining the interdependence of cultural categorization and ontology, the research reveals that Gosh's classification of persons, actions, and norms functioned simultaneously as a juridical mechanism and a theological statement. The law's tripartite structure—divine, ecclesiastical, and civil—reflects an Armenian-Christian worldview in which moral and social dimensions of existence were inseparable. The findings confirm that the *Girk' Datastani* unifies spiritual doctrine and civic governance, establishing a legal ontology that maintained high impact beyond the Middle Ages.

Despite its interdisciplinary approach, this study faced several limitations. First, it relied primarily on textual and semantic analysis of existing editions and translations, without a comparative study across all manuscript variants. This constraint limits the shifts in meaning across regions or centuries. Second, while the paper introduces digital and ontological modeling (through OWL and SKOS representations), these frameworks need to be piloted with fully functional datasets. The study thus suggests a conceptual rather than empirical approach in its computational component.

Future research can extend this inquiry in several directions. From a philological standpoint, a comprehensive corpus-based comparison of all manuscript witnesses and early print editions would refine the semantic analysis of Gosh's terminology. Digitally, a complete encoding of the *Girk' Datastani* in interoperable ontology frameworks (OWL-DL, SKOS, RDF) could enable machine-readable models of Armenian legal and cultural thought, offering valuable contributions to the digital humanities of low-resource languages. A cross-cultural comparison of Islamic, Georgian, and Syriac legal corpora could further clarify the regional transmission of legal-ontological ideas. From a cognitive perspective, integrating theories of linguistic categorization and moral cognition may reveal how premodern legal reasoning structured human understanding of justice and responsibility. Finally, further interdisciplinary studies could transform the *Girk' Datastani* from a historical artifact into a living knowledge model—bridging medieval ontology with twenty-first-century semantic technologies and preserving Armenia's intellectual heritage within the global digital ecosystem.

ԱՄՓՈՓՈՒՄ

Հոդվածը դիտարկում է Մխիթար Գոշի «Գիրք Դատաստանի»-ն որպես իրավական կորպուս և մշակույթաստեղծ համակարգ՝ միջնադարյան հայ իրավական միտքը ներկայացնելով թվային իմաստաբանության տեսանկյունից։ Սա լեզվաբանական, փիլիսոփայական և թվային-հումանիտար հայեցակերպերի միջգիտակարգային ինտեգրման փորձ է, որը հնարավոր է դարձնում ցույց տալու, որ Գոշի դատաստանագրքի ամեն մի բաժինը առանձին իրավական օնտոլոգիա է, որը հնարավոր է դարձնում իրավական խոսույթի վերլուծության կամ թարգմանական նպատակներով։

Իմաստային հարաբերությունների թվային մոդելավորումը օգնում է իմաստային կատեգորիաները ներկայացնել որպես մշակույթային գիտելիք, որը կարելի է կոդավորել մեքենայի համար ընթեռնելի ձևով։ Հոդվածը եզրակացնում է, որ «Գիրք Դատաստանին» եվրոպական իրավական ընբռնումներից առաջ ստեղծված իրավական հասկացությունների համակարգ է։ Դրա թվային վերարտադրությունը կարևոր է

հայկական մտավոր ժառանգության պահպանության և իրավական զաղափարների միջմշակութային տարածման օրինաչափությունններն ուսումնասիրելու առումներով:

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