

Philologica Wratislaviensia: From Grammar to Discourse

Edited by Zdzisław Wąsik



Magdalena Zabielska

# Searching for the Patient's Presence in Medical Case Reports



# Introduction

It is a truism, yet universally acknowledged, that medicine has played a fundamental role in people's lives. Medicine concerns their health which conditions their functioning in society. It is medical professionals and their expertise that patients trust their lives with when they are ailing. That communication between doctors and patients is the key to success of treatment seems another truism, especially in the light of the recent substantial body of research into health communication. These issues appear to be of particular relevance in the era of European citizenship and mass migration of people. Yet, there is another type of communication, possibly less prominent but not less interesting to analyze. It is restricted to medical community and it aims at sharing medical knowledge. This communication may seem to exclude patients but it does not mean it does not concern them. They are written about and it appears critical how this is done.

The present work seeks to examine how patients are portrayed in professional medical texts. In more detail, the research question is whether patients are presented as subjects or objects of medical study and practice, or, in other words, whether they are imaged as whole persons and experiencing individuals in the descriptions of diagnosis and treatment. To this aim, a corpus of medical case reports from British and American journals available online has been analyzed paying special attention to the textual presence or absence of patients in the accounts of diseases and medical procedures, and possible explanations for these modes of reference. On the one hand, linguistic means used in patient imaging have been studied from a pragmatic perspective, i.e., their function in mediating particular information. On the other hand, the historical background of case reports has been taken into consideration as well as the present context of their production as factors instrumental in shaping this particular genre in form and content. Moreover, to give a detailed explication of the examined aspect, the analysis has drawn on a number of concepts from the sociology of medicine and medical semiotics. Furthermore, an attempt has been made to determine whether the researcher's interpretation of the texts at hand is shared by other readers. To this end, the results of the textual analysis have been confronted with the opinions of a group of respondents who have been asked to read selected fragments of the texts from the examined corpus.

The results appear to be of great importance, as what distinguishes medicine from other scientific areas is that it does not only study diseases and develop new ways of their treatment but also manages patients who suffer all the consequences of being ill. Following this argument, it is the present author's belief that the writing about methods of enhancing patients' treatment should still refer to patients as beneficiaries of these methods, not only as those to whom these methods apply. This particular commitment situates the present work in a broader body of research postulating a patient-centered approach in medicine. What is more, patient presentation and its interpretation appear to be issues of concern in the light of the fact that texts written by the already established members of the profession not only acquaint novices with particular attitudes and values but also promote discipline-specific modes of writing.

The present work is based on the author's PhD dissertation entitled "Is there a patient in the text? A discourse study of patient imaging in case reports from British and American medical journals", defended in the School of English at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. Only selected fragments of the dissertation have been published in linguistic journals and edited collections. The work consists of six chapters. While the first four present the theoretical and methodological background for the study, the remaining two are empirical in nature. In Chapter One, the key notions are explicated such as discourse, discourse analysis, text, etc. Moreover, theoretical background is discussed which includes various approaches to the relation of language, thought and reality, studies of scientific discourses in the context of their production as well as genre theory. The chapter also gives an overview of various genres subsumed under the label *medical discourse*. The aim of Chapter Two is to demonstrate the beginnings and evolution of the case report genre against the background of changing intellectual thought-styles and developing medicine of the nineteenth century. The chapter points specifically to those events in the history of medicine which affected medical discourse in general and case reports in particular. Chapter Three looks at the genre of case report from a contemporary perspective. The current mode of reasoning in medical practice and selected facts about medical education are presented as contextual factors influencing production and reproduction of medical discourse. Analytical tools and notions used in the empirical part of the work are listed and explicated in Chapter Four. In Chapter Five, patient imaging in the corpus of case reports is analyzed and discussed, whereas in Chapter Six, the reception of some of these results in the sample of students of medicine is demonstrated.

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Magdalena Zabielska

# Chapter One: Theoretical background

Drawing on a useful classification of various approaches to discourse analysis proposed by Nelson Phillips and Cynthia Hardy (2002), the present work is located in the area of social linguistic analysis which can be characterized as being constructivist and text-based in nature. According to the above authors, the aim of this framework is “to undertake a close reading of the text to provide insight into its organization and construction, and also to understand how texts work to organize and construct other phenomena” (Phillips and Hardy 2002: 22). This methodological choice excludes critical discourse analysis with its ideological commitment, which will be reflected in the decision of how the term *discourse* is understood in the present work. Moreover, it is constructivist in that it views the texts as shaped in the course of the history of the development of medicine. At this point a distinction should be made between distal and proximate contexts of the production of the texts. Distally, the evolution of the case report genre against the background of the history of medicine is taken into consideration. Proximately, the focus falls on the present context in which case reports are written, i.e., the current model of medical practice with its methodologies and modes of reasoning. The reflection of these factors in contemporary case reports will be demonstrated in the empirical part of the work where the linguistic selections used to write about patient diagnosis and treatment have been analyzed. Additionally, these choices have been investigated in the light of their potential to influence readers’ perception. It is to be seen whether specific modes of writing about patients can be constitutive of certain modes of interpretation.

With reference to the basic distinction between quantitative and qualitative tradition, introduced by Zoltán Dörnyei (2007), both empirical chapters of the present work will be based on a mixed methodology and will follow the sequence of quan/QUAL → quan/QUAL (see Dörnyei 2007: 169). In the textual analysis of the corpus of medical case reports, the qualitative discussion of patient imaging will be supported by the quantitative data, i.e., the statistical analysis of patient reference. The two methodologies will also be used in the study of the reception of the texts by a wider audience, in which the conclusions from the analysis of the case reports are tested. Here the respondents’ answers

will be presented in percentages and discussed further. The use of lower and upper case in quan/QUAL → quan/QUAL underscores the gradation of importance of each stage in the two parts. It should also be noted that the study of the case reports – Chapter Five – is more extensive whereas the administered questionnaire – Chapter Six – has been designed to complement the results of the textual analysis. Lastly, the arrow denotes the sequence of the studies. Most important, the key concepts in the work will be discussed.

## 1. Discourse and discourse analysis

It seems that the terms *discourse* and *discourse analysis* are ubiquitous in contemporary linguistic literature which runs a gamut of definitions. The choice of the appropriate definition as well as the type of the analysis on the part of a researcher is dictated by the aims of the specific project and the data that are to be examined. Zoltán Dörnyei (2007: 30) refers to such an approach to methodology as “situationalist”. In the present work, two understandings of discourse will be adopted, namely Norman Fairclough’s (2003) definition which is more general and Kieran O’Halloran’s (2003) which is more specific.<sup>1</sup> According to Fairclough (2003), generally, discourse may be understood as language which stands in relation to and is part of social reality (2003: 3, 26). This relation is manifested in a threefold manner – as ways of being, acting and representing. Firstly, ways of being constitute modes of linguistic behavior characteristic of individuals as well as of communities. Fairclough (2003) calls this phenomenon a *style*, for instance a style of a doctor. Secondly, discourse may be realized in various written and spoken forms, e.g., in newspaper articles and speeches respectively which are, at the same time, specific modes of mediating information. Thirdly, discourse may be representational in the form of particular discourses constituting different viewpoints from which reality can be approached (Fairclough 2003: 26).<sup>2</sup> These different vantage points correspond to various domains of people’s lives which have their inherent modes of referring to reality, for instance medical discourse, legal discourse, political discourse, etc. Therefore, while discourse pertains to any form of symbolic representation, discourses are concrete realizations inherent to the contexts in which they

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1 According to O’Halloran (2003: 12), these definitions of discourse differ from Michel Foucault’s treatment of the term (2002 [1969]) in which he focuses on how knowledge is mediated and later reworked in the context of institutions (this aspect is also discussed by Erica Burman et al. 1997 and Norman Fairclough 2003).

2 The claim that discourse (language) is representational goes back to the numerous approaches to functions of language, e.g., Karl Bühler’s (1990 [1934]).

are produced. Gunther Kress (1985: 7) explains that “[a] discourse provides a set of possible statements about a given area, and organizes and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about”. In Michael Karlberg’s (2004: 14) words, discourses are ways of talking about specific things, as “[t]hey provide the productive scaffolding for human talk, thought, and practice”.

Moreover, Fairclough’s (2003) ways or representing are closely linked to the other definition of discourse adopted in this work, namely O’Halloran’s (2003) who views it as the reader’s comprehension of a text. The author points to various aspects which are instrumental in the process of understanding and emphasizes the context to which discourse is inextricably linked (2003: 12).<sup>3</sup> Consequently, while the former definition (Fairclough 2003) binds discourses to their contexts, the latter (O’Halloran 2003) focuses on the interpretation of discourses, for instance of texts.<sup>4</sup> What is more, the representational relation corresponds to the representational function of language, whereas the relations of being and acting are conversant with the main tenets of social constructionism which will be discussed later in this chapter.

## 2. Text

Texts are arenas for discourses. They may include only one type of a discourse or they may be collages of many. “Texts are the sites of the emergence of complexes of social meanings” (Kress 1995: 122), which makes them a unique source of information about particular realizations of discourses, embedded in contexts. Although it remains a challenge for researchers to capture this elusive relation between texts and social reality, nevertheless text analysis should be an essential part of discourse analysis. As Fairclough (2003) argues, “any analysis of texts ... has to connect with theoretical questions about discourse (e.g., social ‘constructive’ effects of discourse). On the other hand, no real understanding of the social effects of discourse is possible without looking closely at what happens when people talk or write” (2003: 3). In the present work, I take Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday’s (1979) view on language and text. As regards the former, according to Halliday (1979), language offers an array of choices how meaning can be expressed, i.e., a *meaning potential*, which is manifested in the

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3 The very idea of examining discourse in its context comes from Foucault (2002 [1969]: 28).

4 The choice of the second definition was dictated by the aims of the second stage of the empirical part of the present work, i.e., the administration of the questionnaire among students of medicine (cf. Chapter Six).

lexico-grammatical system (1979: 122). Halliday's (1979) approach, therefore, focuses on the many ways in which a speaker/writer is able to phrase his/her thoughts. With respect to the latter, a given text is the *actualized meaning potential* (Halliday 1979: 122), a semantic content encoded in the lexico-grammatical system (1979: 138). As Niklas Luhmann (1990) observes, "[m]eaning always involves focusing attention on one possibility among many. ... Meaning is the link between the actual and the possible; it is not one or the other" (1990: 83). Consequently, every piece of information can be phrased in a variety of ways, thus, conveyed in a particular mode, and any choice in language that is made should always be viewed with reference to other options that could have been possible. Therefore, pertinent is the question whether the choice of words as well as what is present/absent in a text may affect the reader's interpretation of this text. This question will be addressed in Chapter Six.

### 3. Genre

It has been said that one of the manifestations of the relation between discourse and social reality are ways of acting, e.g., types of communication which have certain functions (see section 1.). These are called genres and they stand in a symbolic relation to social reality. On the basis of Foucault's (1994) very similar distinction, Fairclough (2003: 29) presents the scheme of a dialectic relation between discourse and genre in which "discourses (representational meaning) [are] enacted in genres (actional meaning)". What is also characteristic of genres is that they always serve a particular purpose. Consequently, Fairclough (2003) refers to them as "ways of Acting and Relating" (2003: 29). This dynamic element also reverberates in John Swales's (1990) widely acclaimed definition of genre, when he refers to it as an event. The definition has it that genre is a

... recognisable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs. Most often it is highly structured and conventionalized with constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their intent, positioning, form and functional value. These constraints, however, are often exploited by the expert members of the discourse community to achieve private intentions within the framework of socially recognized purpose(s) (Swales 1990: 58).

Firstly, according to the definition, the essential part of a genre is its aim. Although there are other factors which may influence the form of a genre, for instance audience, channel or medium, the goal of a genre seems to take priority. This view is also shared by Fairclough (2003) when he observes that the analysis of a chosen genre presupposes the question: "what are people doing [discoursally]?"