



Impersonality in medical case reports

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The purpose of the present paper is to examine the construction of impersonality with respect to agency and patient presentation in medical case reports. The focus falls not only on how clinicians/researchers distance themselves from the subject of medical inquiry, but also how their linguistic choices may affect the textual visibility of patients. Following Bazerman (1988), who claims that scientific discourse is shaped by a given discipline (1988: 47), the two phenomena may be conditioned by the nature of medicine as an area of study and practice. As far as the former is concerned, Beagan (2000) claims that medical students are taught to execute objectivity and personal withdrawal in their profession. They are supposed to report only the facts, limiting patients' subjective input to the minimum. With reference to medicine as an area of practice, medical discourse may also reflect the premises of the biomedical model of medicine, which has been used since the mid-nineteenth century. In short, this framework views illness as a direct consequence of the diseased body and patients as mere recipients of treatment (Wade-Halligan 2004: 1398). The analysis of fifty medical case reports reveals that impersonality is used in a twofold manner. Firstly, specific grammatical and lexical resources may be employed to remove agency. Secondly, the very choice of which message is highlighted may also contribute to the impersonal character of the texts. The results of the study are discussed with reference to some contextual factors determining the presented language use patterns in medical case reports.

References:

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