

IS THE LANGUAGE OF INFORMED CONSENT TEMPLATES FOR DENTAL TREATMENT PATIENT-FRIENDLY?

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Abstract. The patient's voluntary informed consent for medical intervention has been known as an integral part of the modern system of moral, ethical and legal regulation of healthcare provision. Grammar complexity of formal language and terminology differences between healthcare providers and patients may cause communication problems and adversely affect patient access to health information, leading to poor satisfaction for both parties. There have been few reports clarifying the selection of the language means in order to facilitate patients' complete and unhindered understanding of the information in informed consent template for dental treatment and to influence them in making the right decision. The aim of the study is to investigate grammar characteristics (sentence structure, voice, the tense and aspect of finite verb phrases) and to analyze the findings from functional perspective and communicative purposes. This empirical research of qualitative descriptive type was based on the corpus of 50 informed consent templates for dental treatment used by the USA healthcare settings authorized to provide oral and dental services. Critical discourse analysis is a main analytic technique employed in the study. The main idea behind the informed consent is that individuals having obtained a sufficient amount of special information and clearly understood it should be able to make their own knowledgeable and voluntary decisions concerning the exposure to potentially dangerous dental procedures. Text structuring, headings, metatextual devices in the templates demonstrate doctor's responsibility for understanding text by the patients, i.e. the respectful and careful attitude to the clients. The average length of the texts and the average length of the sentences are also taken into account, whereas the documents are designed within the patient-centred approach and in patient-friendly manner. Though the texts of informed consent templates are relatively short, they abound in composite sentences: the complex sentences make up 69.3 %, the complex-compound sentences make up to 7.14%. Simple sentences, 21.5%, rank the second position. Composite sentences as well as numerous simple sentences with extended homogenous parts are exploited in the informed consent templates in order to minimize misunderstanding in the interpretation medical information, but, on the other hand, they can to interfere with quick and complete comprehension of the dependency relations among the ideas expressed in the sentences. Sentences in the active voice exceed those in passive voice that makes the text more readable and understandable.

Key words: informed consent templates, genre, sentence structure, voice, tense, aspect, finite verb phrases.

Introduction. Though healthcare services are committed to putting patients at the centre of their own focus, misunderstandings due to grammar complexity of formal language and terminology differences between healthcare providers and patients may cause communication problems and adversely affect patient access to health information, leading to poor satisfaction for both parties. There have been few reports clarifying the selection of the language means in order to facilitate patients' complete and unhindered understanding of the information in informed consent template for dental treatment and to influence them in making the right decision.

The in-depth linguistic analysis of informed consent forms, which are integral part of the modern system of moral, ethical and legal regulation of healthcare provision, is not only of great applicability in terms to facilitate achieving clear communication through thoroughly selected vocabulary, grammar, formatting, and, thus, to lessen resistance in readers, but it also provides an insight into a complex set of cues that help to decode a particular situation model described in texts of informed consents, as well as to highlight conventions within the socio-cultural context where it is produced. This paper highlights the investigation of grammar characteristics (sentence structure, voice, the tense and aspect of finite verb phrases) and provides their analysis from functional perspective and communicative purposes.

Methodology. This is an empirical research of qualitative descriptive type; 50 informed consent templates for dental treatment used as study material were searched for by using Google search engine and retrieved from the sites of the USA healthcare settings authorized to provide oral and dental services (*New York City Metropolitan Hospital Center, Alliance for Dental Care PLLC (Rochester, NH)*). A general principle of functional approach implies studying the elements of a language, language resources and their correlations in terms of their functions in communication, i.e. how they relate to each other and how they create units of meaning (Tomlin, 1986). Communicative purposes of the documents are the central component determining the selection of the appropriate language means. Critical discourse analysis "combining and "internal" study of language with "external" study of its context" is a main analytic technique employed in the study (Cheng, 2009, p. 363).

Findings / Discussion. The main idea behind informed consent is that individuals having obtained sufficient amount of special information and clearly understand it should be able to make their own knowledgeable and voluntary decisions concerning the exposure to potentially dangerous dental procedures (Kostenko & Solohor, 2018). The texts of ICT templates typically consist of nine or ten structural blocks, each developing a single topic out of the most relevant issues underlying the communicative situation of engaging patients in "meaningful discourse in an effort to optimize patient understanding of diagnoses and treatments, including their rationale, risks, benefits, goals, and alternative treatment options" (Reid, 2017, p. 79). Text structuring, headings, metatextual devices demonstrate the respectful and careful doctor's attitude to the clients, doctor's responsibility for understanding text by patients.

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The texts are relatively short, 28 – 30 sentences long; an average word number in each sentence is 19, which is even lower than the typical accepted sentence length for secondary education (25 words in English). The overall results of the analysis of sentence types demonstrated the predominance of composite sentences over simple ones: the complex sentences make up 69.3 %, the complex-compound sentences make up to 7.14%, while the share of compound sentences is relatively small, 2.06%. Meanwhile, the percentage of simple sentences ranking the second position is 21.5%.

Such types of sentences are inherent in formal writing, and in particular, in legal documents (informed consent forms are examples of the last), special texts, as they are able to provide detailed information and to organize it into logical argumentation. Complex sentences reflect the intricacy of the procedure on obtaining / giving informed consent for dental treatment and a number of factors, which should be considered by both dental professionals and patients. In the ICT texts, complex sentences are exploited in order to avoid misunderstanding in the interpretation medical information, but, on the other hand, they can to interfere with quick and complete comprehension of the dependency relations among the ideas expressed in the sentences. Examples of these sentence types are as follows:

(1) *I further understand that I may be wearing temporary crowns, which come off easily and that I must be careful to ensure that they are kept on until the permanent crown is delivered.*

(2) *When fillings are placed or replaced, the preparation of the teeth often requires the removal of tooth structures adequate to ensure that the diseased or otherwise compromised tooth structure provides sound tooth structure for placement of the restoration.*

Describing the simple sentences, we would like to point out there are many of them having extended homogenous parts:

(3) *These complications may include: blocked canals due to fillings or prior treatment, natural calcifications, broken instruments, curved roots, periodontal disease (gum disease), splits or fractures of teeth.*

This type of sentences is to define, concretize specific information relevant to patients.

Of all the English verb tenses and aspects, there have been found out only five typically used combinations for creating ICTs: *Simple Present* (39%), *Perfect Present* (35%), *Simple Future* (23%), *Continuous Present* (6%), *Simple Past* (3%).

It is highly predictable that the most frequent tense in the texts studied is the Simple Present, known as “the most general and unmarked category” (Grisot, 2018, p.29). Most of the verbs in the Simple Present refer to things in general, or express general facts within the field of dentistry or special scientific facts, for example, when describing the development or progression of diseases, their course, treatment and prevention:

(4) *The bacteria that cause tooth decay occur in the presence of sugars. Prevention of dental caries improves with proper diet, fluoride therapy, use of dental sealants, and regular dental examinations and cleanings.*

It can also be assumed that since verbs in the Present Simple are shorter in the number of syllables, have no tense morphemes (third-person singular morpheme –s is as an exception), and therefore simpler to be grasped, they are more desirable and grammatically relevant in the ICTs elaborated for an average patient, who is presupposed to have an 8th grade reading level according to International standard classification of education (Barro & Lee, 2013), however, most informed consent templates are written at a 10th grade reading level or higher (Darriba, 2018, p.130).

Doctor’s-driven initiative and guidance on communication with patients, on the one hand, and patient’s active involvement in the decision making and treatment process are grammatically represented by using sentences in the active voice that exceed the number of sentences in the passive voice in the texts studied, 53,8%, versus 47,2%, respectively.

Conclusions / Recommendations. Though effective doctor-patient communication is a central clinical function, high informational density of texts, represented at the syntax level may impede their quick and correct perception. Investigating syntactic characteristics of the informed consent can considerably contribute to clearer understanding of the conventions and the principles of functioning of professional discourse. The results of this study can contribute to creating the descriptive frameworks of the genre of informed consent for dental treatment as well as can be used in educational settings to assist medical students to comprehend and master this important grammatical area, and to improve their deep understanding of the interpretation and production of genre-specific texts.

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