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Passive constructions in a corpus of Randomised Controlled Trials

The purpose of the present paper is (1) to provide an overview of the activities of The Centre for Biomedical and Health Linguistics (www.bmhlinguistics.org), an organization dedicated to facilitating communications in biomedicine and health; and (2) to present the results of analyses of passive constructions in a corpus of reports of Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) – a ‘gold standard’ methodology for testing the efficacy of healthcare interventions.

Writings in biomedicine and health have been criticized for overuse of the passive construction – a structure which critics claim results in verbosity and a lack of clarity (Sheen 1982, Albert 2004). As research in this field is performed with the intention of influencing and improving health care policies and practices, clarity is tantamount. However, authors seeking to publish in biomedical journals are presented with conflicting messages. On the one hand, publishing guidelines for journals and writing guides may discourage use of the passive. On the other hand, in the same journals passive constructions are highly frequent (Amdur et al. 2010) and, therefore, represent an established convention in biomedical writing. It would seem therefore that guidelines which state only, for example, that authors should "[u]se active voice" (Annals of Emergency Medicine 2010) are over-simplistic.

BMH Linguistics, a collaboration between linguists and biomedical/health researchers, aims to enhance understanding of “biomedical English” (the lingua franca of the field). We present here an overview of the activities of BMH Linguistics, focusing on the creation and analysis of corpora of literature from targeted domains in biomedicine and health (e.g. Millar & Budgell 2008) and the development of web-tools to provide access to the corpora. The study of passive constructions in RCTs illustrates the work of BMH Linguistics and how corpus analyses can help facilitate effective communication.

The RCT corpus comprises all reports of RCTs published in the five top ranking medical journals in 2005 (298 articles; c. 1.2 million words). Using part-of-speech annotation, passive constructions (c. 19,700 in total) were extracted from the corpus and analysed. Results show that long passive constructions, where agent is mentioned, are relatively rare. The distribution of passives within articles indicates that it is used most frequently in methods and results sections – although frequency varies greatly from article to article. Statistical analyses of verbs most strongly associated with the passive construction also indicate that passive constructions are strongly associated with expository functions. The implications of these findings for author guidelines are discussed.

References

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