**Valentina Rapajić**
University of Defence
Military Academy

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# METADISCOURSE RESOURCES OF SELF-REFERENCE IN MEDICAL CASE REPORTS

## Summary

As a metadiscourse resource, self-reference is examined in a corpus of medical case reports (MCRs) published in medical journals in Great Britain, the USA, and Serbia. The practice of medicine entails doctor-patient interaction, and MCRs report the authors' own experience of treating a patient; therefore, expressions of self-reference, unlike in other scientific text-types, are not uncommon. The present paper examines similarities and differences in typology, frequency and distribution of self-reference expressions in MCRs written by native and non-native speakers of English.

**Key words:** English, metadiscourse, self-reference, medical case report, medical journal

## 1 Introduction

The medical case report (MCR) is "a medical recount of a pathological condition in a single patient" (Helán 2012: 57). More precisely, MCRs are "stories or narratives of the onset, development and treatment of a pathological condition in a single patient" (ibid, 63). They are a vehicle for medical practitioners to share their experiences and insights with peers. Green and Johnson (2000: 52) list a multitude of reasons for publishing a case report, from presenting an unusual or unknown disorder, unusual aetiology, or a challenging differential diagnosis, to describing unusual or puzzling clinical features, improved or unique technical procedures, but also doctors' mistakes; to prompting, disconfirming, or supporting a hypothesis and thus stimulating further research.

In the hierarchy of evidence on which clinical decision-making is based, case reports are considered the most subjective (Greenhalgh 2001: 39-55). Unlike the impersonal tone of scientific writing, this type of text exhibits, not infrequently, a personal voice of the authors, self-reference being one of the means through which the authors' presence in text is established. "The highly personal nature of a physician's experience of interaction with a patient conveyed in a MCR, even where teams of specialists participate in the diagnosis and treatment, and the authorship of the text may be said to be collective, makes self-reference highly likely.'' (Rapajić 2018, in press).

In his research on academic writing, Hyland explores self-reference within the framework of metadiscourse. "Metadiscourse is self-reflective linguistic material referring to the evolving text and to the writer and imagined reader of that text" (Hyland 2004: 156). Metadiscoursal resources are the linguistic resources that "organize a discourse or the writer's stance towards either its content or the reader" (Hyland 2000: 109). Distinguishing between interactive metadiscoursal resources (that help to guide the reader through text) and interactional ones (that involve the reader in the argument), Hyland identifies instances of self-reference as belonging to the latter (2004: 169). An overview of Hyland's metadiscoursal resources with brief explanations and examples is given in the table below.

| CATEGORY | FUNCTION | EXAMPLES |
|---|---|---|
| Interactive resources | | |
| Transitions | express semantic relation between main clauses | *in addition / but / thus / and* |
| Frame markers | refer to discourse acts, sequences, or text stages | *finally / to conclude / my purpose is* |
| Endophoric markers | refer to information in other parts of the text | *noted above / see Fig / in section 2* |
| Evidentials | refer to source of information from other texts | *according to X / (Y, 1990) / Z states* |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Code glosses | help readers grasp meanings of ideational material | *namely /e.g. / such as / in other words* |
| Interactional resources | | |
| Hedges | withhold writer's full commitment to proposition | might / perhaps / possible / about |
| Boosters | emphasize force or writer's certainty in proposition | *in fact / definitely / it is clear that* |
| Attitude markers | express writer's attitude to proposition | *unfortunately / I agree / surprisingly* |
| Engagement markers | explicitly refer to or build relationship with reader | *consider / note that / you can see that* |
| Self-mentions | explicit reference to author(s) | *I / we / my / our* |

Table 1. Interactive and interactional metadiscoursal resources. (Hyland 2004: 169).

## 2 Objectives

The aim of this exploratory study is to compare instances of self-reference in MCRs published in British, US, and Serbian medical journals (where the language of publication, English, is not the authors' first language), and to determine, through their typology, frequency, and distribution, whether or not they signal culture-dependent patterns in scientific writing.

## 3 Corpus and Method

The corpus compiled for the purposes of this exploratory study totals 60 MCRs from 6 medical journals. Texts from *British Medical Journal of Case Reports* (henceforth BMJCR) and *Oxford Medical Case Reports* (henceforth OMCR) represent British English; texts from *American Journal of Case Reports* (henceforth AJCR) and *Journal of Investigative*

*Medicine High Impact Case Reports* (JIMHICR) represent American English; and texts from *Military Medical and Pharmaceutical Journal of Serbia* (Војносанитетски преглед in Serbian; henceforth MMPJS) and *Medical Review* (Медицински преглед in Serbian; henceforth MR) represent L2 English in Serbian medical journals published in English. The texts collected for the corpus were published in 2016 and 2017.

The criteria for inclusion in the corpus were accessibility of texts[1], affiliations of authors, and the country in which the journal is published. All texts in the corpus have multiple authors. To be comparable, all MCRs chosen for the corpus present a single patient whose treatment outcome is favourable.

Word count was performed using T. Cobb's *Web VP Classic v.4* software[2]. The phrases that include self-reference were manually noted and listed. The data obtained in this way were analyzed in terms of their lexicosyntactic type, frequency, and distribution across MCRs in the corpora (British English, American English, L2 English), the subcorpora (defined by the medical journal that was the source for the texts), and in individual MCRs.

## 4 Results and Discussion

Self-reference resources found in these corpora exhibit constructions of predication (with *we* as the subject in all instances except two, where the subject is *the authors*) and modification (with the possesssive adjective *our* in all instances but one, where the possessive pronoun *ours* is used; both forms are in the first person plural). Hyland's examples of self-reference are exactly of these two types (Table 1). Another type of self-reference resource was also identified on these corpora: reference to the members of medical profession involved in the care of the patient. The table below provides quantitative data from the corpora.

1 BMJCR is partly open access; the other five journals are fully open access.
2 www.lextutor.ca

| Corpora | Sub-corpora | Size (number of tokens) | Average size of texts | Predication (*we* ...) number of instances / number of instances per 100 tokens | | | | Modification (*our* ...) number of instances / number of instances per 100 tokens | | | | | RMP |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | present | report | describe | other verbs | patient | case | place of work | other lexical items | t. o. k. | |
| UK Medical Journals | BMJCR | 13184 | 1318 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 7 | 5 | 11 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 9 |
| | OMCR | 11091 | 1109 | 9 | 2 | 2 | 10 | 11 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Total number of self-reference expressions: 87 | | *24275* | *1214* | *14* | *6* | *6* | *17* | *16* | *14* | *1* | *2* | *2* | *9* |
| Normalised values (per 100 tokens): *0.35* | | | | *0.06* | *0.02* | *0.02* | *0.07* | *0.06* | *0.06* | *0.004* | *0.01* | *0.01* | *0.04* |
| US Medical Journals | AJCR | 17666 | 1767 | 5 | 10 | 3 | 9 | 30 | 7 | 6 | 2 | 6 | 2 |
| | JIMHICR | 15133 | 1513 | 8 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 24 | 17 | 2 | 7 | 5 | 8 |
| Total number of self-reference expressions: 171 | | *32799* | *1638* | *13* | *16* | *8* | *15* | *54* | *24* | *8* | *9* | *14* | *10* |
| Normalised values (per 100 tokens): *0.49* | | | | *0.04* | *0.05* | *0.02* | *0.04* | *0.16* | *0.07* | *0.02* | *0.03* | *0.04* | *0.03* |
| Serbian Medical Journals | MMPJS | 15802 | 1580 | 8 | 4 | 1 | 22 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | MR | 15224 | 1522 | 6 | 1 | 1 | 12 | 11 | 8 | 5 | 5 | 0 | 16 |
| Total number of self-reference expressions: 110 | | *31026* | *1551* | *14* | *5* | *2* | *34* | *15* | *10* | *9* | *5* | *0* | *16* |
| Normalised values (per 100 tokens): *0.36* | | | | *0.04* | *0.02* | *0.01* | *0.11* | *0.05* | *0.03* | *0.03* | *0.02* | *0* | *0.05* |
| Total number of self-reference expressions in the whole corpus: *368* | | | | *41* | *27* | *16* | *66* | *83* | *48* | *18* | *16* | *16* | *35* |

t.o.k. – to (the best of) our knowledge

RMP – reference to medical professionals

Table 2. Types and frequency of self-reference phrases in the corpora.

Overall, most self-reference resources were found in the US corpus, almost twice the number found in the UK corpus. The frequency of self-reference in the Serbian L2 English corpus, half-way between the two, is closer to the latter.

In both predication and modification, one lexical choice dominates all others: *present* and *patient*, respectively. Other frequent verbs in predication are *report* and *describe*, and a high number of various low frequency verbs (e.g. *we estimate* / *recommend* / *urge caution*). In modification, another frequent lexical choice is *case*. Also found was a relatively small number of other lexical choices (e.g. *our aim / data / conclusion*). Worth mentioning are phrases denoting the authors' place of work (e.g. *our hospital* / *institution* / *facility*), as well as the phraseme *to the (best of) our knowledge* (that stands out in the US corpus but was not recorded in the Serbian L2 English corpus) which, due to its conventionalisation, can be treated as a hedging device rather an instance of self-mention. Reference to medical professionals (e.g. *the cardiologist*, *the neuropsychiatry team*) was frequent enough to warrant treatment of such expression as a separate type of self-reference.

To highlight similarities and differences between the Serbian L2 English corpus and the native English corpora, normalised frequencies of self-reference resources (phrases, not individual words) are ranked in Table 3 in descending order.

| Self-reference instance per 100 tokens | UK corpus | US corpus | Serbian L2 English corpus |
|---|---|---|---|
| 0.16 | | modification with *patient* | |
| 0.11 | | | predication with other verbs |
| 0.09 | | | |
| 0.08 | | | |
| 0.07 | predication with other verbs | modification with *case* | |
| 0.06 | modification with *patient*<br>modification with *case*<br>predication with *present* | | |
| 0.05 | | predication with *report* | reference to medical professionals modification with *patient* |
| 0.04 | reference to medical professionals | predication with other verbs<br>to the (best of) our knowledge<br>predication with *present* | predication with *present* |
| 0.03 | | reference to medical professionals<br>modification with other lexical items | modification with *case*<br>modification with a phrase denoting the place of work |
| 0.02 | predication with *report*<br>predication with *describe* | predication with *describe*<br>modification with a phrase denoting the place of work | modification with other lexical items<br>predication with *report* |
| 0.01 | to the (best of) our knowledge<br>modification with other lexical items | | predication with *describe* |
| 0.004 | modification with a phrase denoting the place of work | | |

Table 3. Normalised frequencies of self-reference resources in the corpora.

In both Serbian L2 English corpus and UK corpora, predication with verbs other than *present*, *report* and *describe* is the most frequent type of self-reference, although the number of instances in the former is twice

the number of that in the latter. In the Serbian L2 English corpus, predication with *present* is equally frequent as in the US corpus (and lower than in the UK corpus), whereas predication with *report* is equally frequent as in the UK corpus. Of all types of self-reference, predication with *describe* is the least frequent in the Serbian L2 English corpus. In the US corpus it is one of the two least frequent types of self-reference; in the UK corpus it has almost the same frequency, but as many as three other types of self-reference are even less frequent.

Frequency of modification with *patient* in the Serbian L2 English corpus is similar to that in the UK corpus, whereas modification with *case* is significantly less frequent than in the native English corpora. Frequency of modification of expressions denoting the place of work in the Serbian L2 English corpus is similar to that in the US corpus; in the UK corpus, however, there is only one instance of this type of self-reference. No significant similarities exist across the corpora in modification with lexemes other than *patient* or *case*.

Self-reference expressions involving the mention of medical professionals are clearly more frequent in the Serbian L2 English corpus than in the native English corpora. On the subcorpora level, interestingly, no instances of this type of self-reference were recorded in two journals, one of them Serbian (MMPJS) and the other British (OMCR), but the number of instances of this type of self-reference in the other Serbian journal (MR) is almost twice the number of instances in the British journal where this type of self-reference was recorded (BMJCR), and almost twice the number of instances in the US corpus, where this type of self-reference is significantly more present in one of the journals (JIMHICR) than in the other (AJCR).

The table below shows different patterns of single or combined types of self-reference in each subcorpus.

| Types of self-reference | Number of MCRs in the corpus | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | UK Corpus | | US Corpus | | L2 English Serbian Corpus | |
| | BMJCR | OMCR | AJCR | JMHICR | MMPJS | MR |
| no self-reference | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| P only | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 |
| M only | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| RMP only | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| P and M | 4 | 7 | 8 | 5 | 5 | 3 |
| P and RMP | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| M and RMP | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| P, M, and RMP | 2 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 5 |
| Total (types of self-reference) | P 7<br>M 9<br>RMP 4 | P 9<br>M 7<br>RMP 0 | P 10<br>M 10<br>RMP 2 | P 9<br>M 9<br>RMP 4 | P 8<br>M 5<br>RMP 0 | P 9<br>M 9<br>RMP 5 |

P – self-reference in a predication construction
M – self-reference in a modification construction
RMP – reference to medical professionals

Table 4. Distribution of types of self-reference in the corpora.

The most represented type of self-reference in the whole corpus is predication self-reference (found in 52 out of 60 texts). Modification self-reference is found in 49 texts, and reference to medical professionals is found in one quarter of the whole corpus (15 texts). At the subcorpus level, domination of predication self-reference is found in OMCR and MMPJS; in three subcorpora the number of texts that contain predication self-reference equals the number of those containing modification self-reference (AJCR, JMHICR, MR). Only in BMJCR do more texts contain modification self-reference than predication self-reference.

The subcorpora exhibit two (AJCR), three (OMCR, JMHICR, MMPJS), four (MR) or as many as five different patterns of self-reference types (BMJ CR).

The coupling of predication and modification type of self-reference is by far the most represented pattern (in 5 out of 6 subcorpora); it is markedly dominant in OMCR and AJCR. The only subcorpus when this combination is superseded by a different pattern is MR (Serbian), where half of the texts combine modification self-reference, predication self-reference, and reference to medical professionals. This last type of-self reference is

in this paper added to those identified by Helan. It only occurs combined with other types of self-reference. Two subcorpora (the UK OMCR and the Serbian MMPJS) do not contain it at all. Only four out of 60 MCRs contain no self-reference at all.

## 5 Conclusion

Three types of self-reference expressions were found in the corpus of 60 medical case reports: predication self-reference (most notably *we present*, *we report*, and *we describe*), modification self-reference (most notably *our patient*, *our case*) and reference to medical professionals (e.g. *the cardiologist*, *the neuropsychiatry team*). As findings vary more between the subcorpora within each national corpus (UK, US, and Serbian) than among the national corpora themselves, evidence of culture-dependent characteristics of self-reference usage in medical text reports, based on frequency and distribution alone, is inconclusive.

## Corpus

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**Валентина Рапајић**
Министарство одбране
Војна академија Београд

# МЕТАДИСКУРСНА СРЕДСТВА САМОПОМИЊАЊА У ПРИКАЗИМА ПАЦИЈЕНТА

## Садржај

Као метадискурсно средство, самопомињање је проучено у корпусу приказа пацијента објављених у медицинским часописима у Великој Британији, САД и Србији. Лекарска пракса подразумева интеракцију лекара и пацијента, а прикази пацијента извештавају о властитом искуству аутора у лечењу пацијнта; стога изрази самопомињања нису реткост, за разлику од других типова текста у научној литератури. У овом раду разматрају се сличности и разлике у типологији, улесталости и дистрибуцији израза самопомињања у приказима пацијента чији су аутори изворни и страни говорници енглеског језика.

**Кључне речи:** енглески, метадискурс, самопомињање, приказ пацијента, медицискни часопис