

Joost Buysschaert

## Review

Pedrini, Giulia (2024):

*Medical communication between Plain Language and Einfache Sprache. A corpus analysis of layperson summaries of clinical trials in English, German, and Italian*

(Easy – Plain – Accessible 16.)

Berlin: Frank & Timme. 524 pp.

The problem of lay-friendly communication in a medical context has been the topic of many publications but, as Giulia Pedrini explains in this book (based on her doctoral dissertation), research had so far failed to concentrate on the layperson summaries of clinical trials required by EU Regulation N° 536/2014.

According to the author (p. 53), this may be because this type of summary has only recently been introduced. Another reason may well be found in the restricted readership of the summaries in comparison with, for example, that of package leaflets. The latter have very often been the subject of research and are primarily intended for patients, i. e. a broad audience. The main target audiences of the summaries are likely to be those who took part in a clinical trial (or are related to them) and patient organisations (p. 46).

Making medical texts accessible to a lay readership involves language simplification (p. 22). Pedrini correctly points out that there is a continuum of text difficulty ranging from ‘Easy Language’ at one end to ‘LSP’ at the other end, with ‘Plain Language’ and ‘standard language’ in between these extremes. She also rightly comments that simplified language varieties have shifting borders, that they even overlap partially, and that languages and countries have different traditions and conventions when it comes to simplification (p. 23).

The EU’s guidelines on how the layperson summaries have to be written come in the form of recommendations of an Expert Group (issued in 2017) and a text entitled *Good Lay Summary Practice* (dated 2021). Pedrini calls the former text “a good starting point” but “sometimes confused and not well organized” (p. 42).

She sets out to do better and embarks on a detailed analysis of the aspects that play a role in making an original summary or its translation layfriendly.

Each of the following nine aspects is thoroughly discussed in one chapter each: terminology and vocabulary; active and passive voice; nominalization; syntactic tendencies; textuality; layout and multimodality; gender-inclusive language; explicitness; readability indices. The role that these factors play is investigated in a corpus of 60 English layperson summaries from four different pharmaceutical companies and their German and Italian translations. The texts are in large part studied quantitatively (mostly with SketchEngine) but additional qualitative analysis is also supplied.

The chapters are uniformly structured, which contributes greatly to the readability of this hefty volume. Each chapter begins with a discussion of the theoretical claims that have been made about the issue in question. This discussion also expands on what has been claimed about the cognitive implications of the issue and what has been recommended in existing guidelines. In sum, the reader is introduced to research in nine areas, which is in itself a valuable component of this book. Each chapter goes on to explain the methodology used for the corpus analysis of the aspect under study. Then follows the analysis itself and a discussion of the results obtained.

Some results may be worth mentioning in this review.

On the topic of terminology, it appears (as may be expected) that the Italian texts use more morphemes of classical origin than do English or German. The analysis also shows that the Italian translations often raise the register, as when the simple word *with* (followed by the name of an illness) is translated as *affetto da* (p. 187). This illustrates that there are different expectations about lay language in different languages, as alluded to above.

There are also slightly more passive constructions in the Italian texts than in the English and German versions, though there are considerable differences between the pharmaceutical companies in this respect (suggesting that either the guidelines received, or the individual translators' preferences, differed).

Nominalization is regarded by many (including the author) as standing in the way of simplification. There are undoubtedly cases where clarity will improve when the nominalized construction is reformulated by means of an active sentence with a verb. However, Pedrini decides to stigmatize all nouns with an ending that may indicate that they are derived from a verb. The question arises whether it is at all desirable to reformulate "nominalizations" like *miscarriage*, *approval*, *defence* or *infection* in every context. Similarly, systematically avoiding *Ergebnis*, *Geburt* or *Arbeit* in German or *vita*, *nascita*, *influenza* in Italian (all of them in the author's lists) is unlikely to improve the comprehensibility of the text.

Hypotaxis is another feature that may complicate sentences. It is, again, more commonly found in the Italian summaries than in the English and German texts. The German texts appear to avoid the original English subordinate clauses, even coordinate clauses, fairly systematically, but tend to replace them with nominalizations. Here too, one wonders whether systematically avoiding hypotaxis is necessary to improve

readability. The cases where complex syntax really stands in the way of clarity are typically those where the sentence starts with a very long subclause (or more than one) and the reader has to wait far too long before he or she reaches the message of the main clause (p. 310 quotes an example of this kind from an English summary).

From the discussion of what the author calls ‘textuality’, it appears that the German and Italian translations increase the number of connectives as compared with the English original. This may also be regarded as one type of explicitation, a well-known tendency in translated texts, also exemplified in additions to explain terms, acronyms or anglicisms.

Gender-inclusive language is also discussed. Pedrini admits that it may stand in the way of comprehensibility, as in “Sprechen Sie mit der Ärztin oder dem Arzt, die/der Sie behandelt” (p. 413). It is a tricky problem. The Recommendations mentioned earlier do not give advice on the subject, and whether gender-inclusive language is used in the

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German corpus appears very much to depend on the individual translators' decisions. It is virtually absent in the Italian summaries.

There is, inevitably, also a chapter on what readability scores can say about the comprehensibility of the layperson summaries. The recommendations of 2017 advise using the *Flesch-Kincaid* method. Pedrini applies *Analyse My Writing* for English, *Ratte* for German and *Gulpease* for Italian. The upshot is that all texts fail to achieve an acceptable score. Medical texts will remain medical texts even if one tries to simplify them.

Pedrini concludes that the texts she has analysed for this study can definitely not be regarded as examples of "Easy Language". They are closer to standard language and could at best be regarded as exemplifying "Plain Language" in a broad interpretation of that concept. She calls the texts "comprehensibility enhanced" (p. 466).

Pages 474ff list Pedrini's own recommendations for writing layfriendly summaries and their translations. They are subdivided into (1) lexical and terminological recommendations, (2) morphosyntactic recommendations, (3) textual recommendations, (4) graphical recommendations and (5) some further recommendations on accessibility.

In conclusion, Pedrini's well-written book offers a rich survey of the relevant literature as well as a broad range of analyses on the basis of a selective corpus. Most of these analyses are convincing, some, like the chapter on nominalizations, are less so. The final set of recommendations is worth sharing with technical writers and translators.

Above all, it transpires that it is not obvious to provide the ultimate layfriendly medical text. Not only do expectations on layfriendliness differ among languages and authors/translators. Also, the phenomena described in the summaries will remain technical, whatever wording one uses to describe them. Pedrini rightly mentions (p. 480) that an interesting complement to her textual analysis would be a study of the actual reception of the texts among their readership. It is likely that opinions and expectations will differ among readers, too.

### Reviewer

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