

“In order to make it easy”: metalinguistic discourse in 18th-century British medical writing

During the 18th-century, the advances in medicine as well as a growing awareness of health issues favoured the circulation of an expanding medical vocabulary (cfr. Loudon 1992, Lane 2001, Harrison 2010) and the publication of multifarious medical texts (cfr. Fissel 2007: 110; cfr. also Lindemann 2010: 111-112).

Reference works for experts at different levels (scholars, physicians, surgeons, practitioners, apothecaries, etc.) and non-experts (educated readers) began to circulate ‘massively’ (cfr. Lane 2001: 24 ff.). The authors aimed at “diffusing medical knowledge among the people” (Buchan 1772: xxiii). This also meant that medical writers needed to develop disciplinary communicative strategies to deal with a complex and challenging matter (cfr. Banks 2008) “to render the book[s] more generally useful [...] as well as acceptable to the intelligent part of mankind” (Buchan 1772: xi). This debate, more often than not carried on in the prefaces to reference works, is particularly intense in the second half of the 18th century.

Vernacularization, along with popularization, is one of the strategies to avoid secrecy and obscurity, and establish a linguistic ‘normative habit’ in the transmission of medical knowledge. Since “Medical authors have generally written in a foreign language [...] in terms and characters unintelligible to the rest of mankind” (Buchan, 1772, Introduction, p. xvii), the need for medical science to be intelligible is strongly highlighted, utility being the principal aim:

I am very well aware that the publication of the following little Treatise, in so plain a Language, will excite the resentment of several of the Faculty [...]. I have studied to write the whole in a very plain language, in order to make it as easy to be understood as possible. (Fisher, 1785, Preface, Incipit)

As a consequence, literary rhetoric, figurative language and obscure expressions were gradually abandoned in medical texts. Medical authors “first scrupulously examined the book of nature, and then accurately copied it in their writings” (ibid.) for the benefit of mankind.¹ Vernacularization and standardizing linguistic practices in medical writing increasingly became the norm; in other words, a renewed and ‘disciplined’ usage being their ‘primary source’ for establishing disciplinary normativity in writing.

The study aims at investigating how the prefaces from a variety of sources – such as English treatises, family physicians, compendia, observations, etc. – introduce and discuss metalinguistic issues in a domain specific field of discourse such as medicine, in order to develop a ‘consistent medical style’, both at a lexical and morphosyntactic levels.

References

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Fisher, J. 1785. *The Practice of Medicine Made Easy. Being a Short, but Comprehensive Treatise, Necessary for Every Family*. [...] London.

¹ Borthwick’s *The Method of Preventing [...] written in plain simple language* (1784), Fisher’s *The Practice of Medicine Made Easy. Being a Short, but Comprehensive Treatise, Necessary for Every Family* (1785), Wallis’s *The Art of Preventing Diseases [...] adapted to Persons of Every Capacity* (1793) as well as Woodman’s *Medicus Novissimus; or, The Modern Physician: [...] The Whole being in a Familiar Style, [...] adapted to the Meanest Capacities of Physical Practitioners* (1722) are just a few examples.

- Wallis, George. 1793. *The Art of Preventing Diseases, and Restoring Health, founded on rational Principles, and adapted to Persons of Every Capacity*. [...] London.
- Woodman, Phil[ip]. 1722 (2nd). *Medicus Novissimus; or, The Modern Physician: [...] The Whole being in a Familiar Style, and thereby adapted to the Meanest Capacities of Physical Practitioners [...]*. London.

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