

# Supporting research communication: an exploratory study of NNES medical writers' awareness of the collocational patterning of abstract nouns in medical discourse

Natalia J. LASO

*Department of English and German Philology  
University of Barcelona, Spain*

Suganthi JOHN

*Department of English  
University of Birmingham, UK*

Research has explored the characteristics of scientific discourse from features such as modality (Widdowson 1979; Banks 1994; Gledhill 2000), hedging (Myers 1989; Swales 1990; Varttala 1999), the use of the passive and the anticipatory *it*-pattern (Swales 1990; Biber et al. 1998/1999; Hyland 2008) to the tendency to use grammatical metaphor (Salager-Meyer 1992; Halliday 1998; Gledhill 2000) and the high use of abstract nouns in the expression of processes and methods (Halliday 1993; Flowerdew 2003). Underpinning this research is an understanding that “[i]n order to understand texts, we must look at them closely to find the lexico-grammatical strategies that they adopt to assist communication within a specialised community” (Williams 2002: 60). Scientific discourse is understood to be “highly stereotypical in nature”, and it seems important that members of this discourse community become familiar with phraseology which might be considered “good scientific style” (Gledhill 2000: 116). It has been argued that in order to produce phraseologically competent texts, typical collocational patterns in that discourse need to be mastered (Gledhill 2000; Flowerdew 2003; Hyland 2008).

This paper reports on a study which aims to investigate if NNES writers, in our case Spanish doctors, who are required to publish in English in medical journals, are aware of the common collocational patterns of abstract nouns that occur in published health science discourse. Twenty-four Spanish doctors completed a worksheet based on the collocational patterning of four abstract nouns (conclusion, comparison, agreement and decision). The analysis of the collocation exercises in the worksheet highlights that the participants were aware of some of the common collocational patterns that occur but still would need support for some others. The paper concludes with a brief reflection on how a health science corpus can be used to help scientists produce phraseologically competent scientific texts.

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## **BIODATA**

**Natalia J. Laso** is a lecturer and researcher in the Department of English and German Philology at the University of Barcelona. She holds a PhD in English Philology from the University of Barcelona and is also a member of the GRELIC Group. Her research interests is focused on three main areas: a) ESP (health science discourse) studies and the main challenges that NNS face when writing their research in English; b) language teaching and the use of corpora in the linguistics classroom; and c) the development of lexicographic tools aimed at helping Spanish speakers improve their phraseological and discourse competence in English. She has recently co-edited the volume *Biomedical English: a corpus-based approach* (by Isabel Verdaguer, Natalia J. Laso & Danica Salazar. Eds.), published by John Benjamins.

**Suganthi John** is Senior Lecturer in English Language in the Department of English Language and Applied Linguistics at the University of Birmingham. Her research investigates academic discourse with the aim of informing the field of advanced academic literacy. Underpinning her research are socio-constructivist conceptions of identity. Her doctoral thesis and postdoctoral publications are pedagogical investigations of academic writing by university writers or postdoctoral writers, highlighting the challenges they face with creating and projecting an appropriate academic identity within their texts. While retaining the focus on identity, her current research has broadened in scope and she now investigates professional writers and students transitioning from further education colleges to university.