

Teaching Medical Slang and Jargon

Összefoglalás: Orvosi szleng és zsargon tanítása

A szleng és a zsargon szakkifejezések hozzátartoznak az orvosi nyelvhez. Az orvosi szleng és zsargon szókészlete egyre növekszik, ennek ellenére a használatukra kevés példát találunk az orvosi szakirodalomban. A szleng használata áthidalhatja azokat a nyelvi nehézségeket az orvosi gyakorlatban, amelyek a diagnosztikai bizonytalanságokból és a betegek kezelésének a problémáiból adódnak. A zsargon szó arra a szakszókincsre utal, amelynek segítségével a szakemberek megtárgyalják a tevékenységüket, az eszközöket és használatukat. Ennek a szaknyelvnek kizárólagos használata jelképezheti az egymás közötti társas kapcsolatokat, szolidaritást és felsőbbrendűséget.

A tanulmány osztályozza az orvosi szleng és zsargon szakkifejezéseket, útmutatást nyújt a használatukra a tanítási gyakorlatban. A szerző véleménye szerint a szleng és a zsargon szakszókincs ismerete átfogó szemléletet kínál az angol szaknyelvet oktatók számára. Annak érdekében, hogy a hallgatók teljes mértékben betekintést nyerjenek az orvosi terminológiába, a szleng és a zsargon, valamint a rövidítések, mozaikszavak és a metaforák elkerülhetetlenül fontosak az oktatók számára a felsőoktatásban.

Kulcsszavak: orvosi szaknyelv, szleng, zsargon, átfogó szemlélet, angol szaknyelv

Introduction

Teaching the future health professionals in Hungary, we should enable them to acquire both the colloquialism in medical conversations and the formal language used in scientific and medical reports within a foreign language, such as English. Teaching slang in a foreign language class has always been a controversial issue and challenge among English language teachers (ELT) and ESP language instructors. However, the

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growing medical vocabulary in slang and jargon shows us that this special terminology forms an integral part in language use.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2016), slang is “an informal or non-standard vocabulary composed of coinages, arbitrarily changed words, and extravagant or forced figures of speech”. On the other hand, jargon is a “language used for a particular activity or by a particular group of people”.

Fox et al. (2003) claim that it has long been known that medical students seem to be cynical from the third year of medical school owing to the contradictions and inconsistencies in the challenges of the training places. Wear et al. (2006) report, based on the professional identity model, that some medical students’ cynicism can be attributed to adaptive behaviour to stressful situations at school and in healthcare institutions. The authors argue that humour and cynicism may serve important functions, such as the survival of the trainees in difficult circumstances. The other model they mention is the intergenerational transmission model. According to this approach, behaviour is learned from peer role models who are cynical themselves. Cynical behaviour is manifested in the slang terminology used by medical professionals at clinics and hospitals. Some slang is pejorative or even abusive in medical context, while other expressions may be humorous for their users. Slang also can be euphemistic, replacing an offensive word with a more acceptable one.

Medical jargon refers to special terminology professionals use to share their knowledge with their colleagues. The purpose of this communication form is the maintenance of an exclusive use of language that excludes the lay public from mutual understanding of health issues (Dirckx 2005). The jargon of medicine ranges from highly technical vocabulary to the common words and phrases related to health.

The sources of medical slang and jargon are various. Most of the slang expressions are learned from seniors or colleagues. Even books and publications, such as *The House of God* (Shem 1978) or Mercurio’s (2002) *Bodies* brought brand new expressions in the language. Serials on television (*ER*, *Doctor House*) use slang and jargon to present professionals’ life for the lay public. Due to the extremely long names of diseases in English, physicians are likely to use acronyms for abbreviating the long terms in everyday conversations. Thus, it seems inevitable for students of English for medical purposes (EMP) to learn the up-to-date slang and jargon terms to be able to communicate with native professionals in an adequate way in proper settings.

Therefore, our paper aims at classifying medical slang and jargon to provide an overview on this growing topic and suggest guidelines for its management in the teaching practice.

The method

We used several medical, slang, and online slang and jargon dictionaries both in English and Hungarian to detect various slang and jargon terms and expressions. These dictionaries and glossaries were as follows:

Fergusson, R. (1994) *Shorter Slang Dictionary*. London: Routledge

Magyar–Angol Orvosi Szótár (1986) Budapest: Terra

Merriam and Webster Dictionary (2016) Merriam-Webster Inc.

Dictionary of Medical Terms (2007) A&C Black: London

Glossary of Medical Terms (2016) http://upstate.edu/hospital/patient/glossary_med_terms.pdf.

Medical Jargon (2016) http://www.ruf.rice.edu/kemmer/Words04/usage/jargon_med.html

Doctors' Slang, Medical Slang, and Medical Acronyms and Veterinary Acronyms & Vet Slang (2015) <http://messybeast.com/dragonqueen/medical-acronyms.html>

Medical slang

In order to teach medical slang and jargon effectively in class, it is important to know the different types of slang and jargon terms.

According to Dirckx's (2005), medical slang is characterized by a great number of short words (Type 1) and expressions derived from longer phrases. We follow his classification and examples in our overview on slang terms in medicine taken from Medical Dictionaries. Single words may have shortened versions with the following subclasses:

1. Words that have lost their beginnings: (colono)*scope*, (electro)*lytes*, (hemato)*crit*
2. Words that have lost their endings: *consult*(ation), *met*(astasis), *retic*(ulocyte)
3. Words that have lost both beginnings and endings: (in)*flu*(enza), (pres)*script*(ion), (diver)*tic*(ulum)
4. Words that have lost something in the middle: *app*(endectom)*y* *cath*(eteriz)*ed*, *prep*(are)*ed*

Phrases have shortened forms based on the former classification as seen above.

1. (Lymph) *node*, (anabolic) *steroid*, (sinoatrial) *node*
2. *Local* (anesthetic), *pelvis* (examination), *portio* (vaginalis)
3. (plasma) *cholesterol* (concentration), (pulsed) *Doppler* (sonography)
4. *White* (blood cell) *count*, *Pap*(anicolaou) *smear*, *sed*(imentation) *rate*

Syntactic shortening is another type of slang in medical language when a verb is formed from an adjective or noun.

to biopsy from biopsy

to gross from to perform gross examination

to code means call for help in cardiopulmonary resuscitation

to guaiac means test a stool specimen for blood for guaiac

A common form of shortening involves the use of acronyms, in which the initial letters of the expression are used instead of the whole phrase. The examples below come from a valuable source: (<http://messybeast.com/medical-acronyms>).

DFO means Drunk and Fell Over

GOMER means 'Get out of my emergency'

LWS means Low Wallet Syndrome (no medical insurance or money)

COPD means Chronic Old Persons Disease (no specific cause)

CLL means Chronic Low Life

ALS means Absolute Loss of Sanity (nutcase)

Humour (Type 2) plays an important role in slang terms within medical context. On the one hand, slang with humour can be pejorative or even rude.

Banana is a patient with jaundice

Meat hooks are medical instruments

Bungee jumper is a patient who pulls on a catheter tube

Coffee and Newspaper – patient is constipated (long time sitting on toilet with drink and reading matter)

Paws up means dead

On the other hand, slang terms with humour can be also euphemistic substituting an offensive word with a more acceptable one.

Poor historian is a patient with bad memory

Adminisphere is the place where hospital management works, in another “planet”

Gatekeeper is a general practitioner who keeps costs low by allowing certain number of patients to go to specialists

Code Yellow is urinary incontinence emergency

Acronyms often occur in euphemistic phrases, such as *M&Ms* (originally referring to the chocolate brand) when the initials stand for mortality and morbidity. This occasion is a conference where physicians discuss problems, mistakes and deaths.

In natural speech, contractions belong to colloquialisms and they serve the function of shortening language. In medical language, contractions are mostly found in everyday conversations and not in formal writing and speech, such as in research papers or public presentations. Contractions occur when internal sounds are omitted in nearby words.

Medical jargon

Medical jargon involves the highly technical vocabulary of the healing profession in order to share an exclusive language as a sign of solidarity among physicians. Medical jargon consists of two main classes: specially coined terms and common words with special meanings.

The first group contains the vast vocabulary of medicine with specific terms referring to a special field of the profession (Magyar–Angol Orvosi Szótár, 1986).

Metapneumonic pleurisy – refers to chest pain caused by human metapneumono-viruses

Hepatosplenomegaly is the enlargement of the liver and the spleen

Parachromatopsia – refers to a condition when objects appear falsely coloured in vision

Anhidrosis is the abnormal lack of sweat in the body

Calyx is the cup-shaped part of the kidneys

The second class encompasses common words with special meanings. Some expressions are metaphors that may have become familiar with the medical professionals, thus they are similar to formal language. The following phrases come from the personal collection of the author.

The chest is clear – means that functioning of the lungs is normal.

Acute abdomen – refers to the inflammation of the abdomen.

Red pipe – means blood vessels.

He spiked a temperature – means that the patient had an extremely high temperature.

Some terms reflect their users' desire to show superiority and linguistic sophistication. Therefore, physicians prefer using *medication* to medicine, *intervention* to treatment, *plasma glucose* to blood sugar. They often use formal verbs, in such sentences: The intervention is *contraindicated*. In ordinary words, the statement means: The treatment is not recommended (Medical Jargon 2016).

Absolute rules, guidelines, and standard conventions for using and teaching medical slang and jargon

The absolute rule for using slang words, phrases, and acronyms in healthcare context is that vulgar or offensive language is out of place in formal writings. Scientific and medical reports belong to these types of writings. The following collections of slang words and phrases (Dirckx 2005) should be translated by more formal expressions in writing.

Appy should be translated by person with suspected appendicitis.

Neuron can be replaced by neurologist.

GP should be translated by family doctor.

LPN can be used as licensed practical nurse who has graduated from a vocational health school but has less clinical training than a registered nurse.

However, some terms look like slang but they are not. These phrases can be found in medical dictionaries, such as *Coca Cola urine* (urine's colour resembles to that of the drink in a liver disease). The expression, *sweaty feet syndrome*, refers to a condition in which the person may experience extreme sweating on the soles of the feet leading to plantar warts or other skin conditions.

It is worth mentioning that not all abbreviations are slang expressions. It is a common practice to write measurement units as abbreviations, such as *cm*, *mg*, or *kg*. Unlike abbreviations, acronyms often stand for slang or common expressions, and sometimes may mean various concepts.

C/C means cancel Christmas (the patient is dead).

DUB is a damn ugly baby.

CFS means chronic fatigue syndrome.

HBP stands for high blood pressure.

MS can stand for multiple sclerosis, Master of Science, or medical student.

Coming from the above fact, letter abbreviations should be expanded in formal writing in order to be clear for the readers.

Cultures were negative for toxigenic *E coli*. can be transcribed as

Cultures were negative for toxigenic *Escherichia coli*.

Clipped forms should be transcribed in full (Huth 1990).

Instead of *labs*, *cathed*, *rehab*, *multip*, *urine* the full terms, such as *laboratory tests*, *catheterized*, *rehabilitation*, *multipara*, *urine specimens* should be given.

Ambiguous terms should be expanded in order to avoid obscure references (Huth 1990).

Instead of *histo*, *histology* or *histoplasmosis* should be written.

Instead of the abbreviation *A/V*, the full word: *arteriovenous* or *arterioventricular* should be given.

Summary

English medical language is characterized by particular duality. On the one hand, practitioners consider language as a kind of game (Wittgenstein 1986) where players follow certain rules when they communicate. The game also involves playfulness which is revealed in cynical or derogatory humour in interactions. Humour shows the speakers' institutional superiority and distinctiveness sharing an exclusive code that

cannot be played with lay persons. On the other hand, medical language owns a highly technical vocabulary involving the vast lexicon of the healing art.

Teaching medical slang and jargon can be a possible way to enable students to gain confidence and interact with native speakers on an equal level. Moreover, understanding this secret language supports social grouping among practitioners, relieves stress, and promotes survival in extremely difficult situations they have to face day by day. As medical language educators we should pay attention to how the above registers in language influence the socialization and language use of medical students. We should provide language that is appropriate in hospital context and at the same time being aware of the fact that frustrating situations in healthcare may trigger derogatory language use among professionals. We acknowledge that slang is likely to be used, but it should be kept to a minimum. Slang should be avoided in medical notes and publications and only properly defined terms can be used. It might be effective to discourage such language use and more useful to explore why it is used.

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