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## **IF-CLAUSES AS HEDGING MEANS IN INFORMED CONSENT TEMPLATES FOR DENTAL PROCEDURES**

### **УМОВНІ РЕЧЕННЯ ЯК ЗАСІБ ХЕДЖУВАННЯ У ФОРМАХ ІНФОРМОВАНОЇ ЗГОДИ НА СТОМАТОЛОГІЧНІ ПРОЦЕДУРИ**

**Kostenko V. H.**

*Candidate of Philological Sciences,  
Associate Professor,  
Associate Professor at the Department  
of Foreign Languages, Latin  
and Medical Terminology  
Poltava State Medical University  
Poltava, Ukraine*

**Костенко В. Г.**

*кандидат філологічних наук, доцент,  
доцент кафедри іноземних мов  
з латинською мовою  
та медичною термінологією  
Полтавський державний медичний  
університет  
м. Полтава, Україна*

**Znamenska I. V.**

*Candidate of Philological Sciences,  
Associate Professor,  
Associate Professor at the Department  
of Foreign Languages, Latin  
and Medical Terminology  
Poltava State Medical University  
Poltava, Ukraine*

**Знаменська І. В.**

*кандидат філологічних наук, доцент,  
доцент кафедри іноземних мов  
з латинською мовою  
та медичною термінологією  
Полтавський державний медичний  
університет  
м. Полтава, Україна*

**Solohor I. M.**

*Candidate of Philological Sciences,  
Associate Professor,  
Associate Professor at the Department  
of Foreign Languages, Latin  
and Medical Terminology  
Poltava State Medical University  
Poltava, Ukraine*

**Сологор І. М.**

*кандидат філологічних наук, доцент,  
доцент кафедри іноземних мов  
з латинською мовою  
та медичною термінологією  
Полтавський державний медичний  
університет  
м. Полтава, Україна*

Obtaining informed consent for dental procedures lies at the core of ethical, patient-centered healthcare. Informed consent is a dynamic dialogue between doctor and patient, guiding patient's shared decision towards or away from treatment options, and a formal document recording the patient's ultimate will and choice regarding a specific dental procedure. This dual role makes it a critical element of holistic patient care worldwide, demanding keen awareness of audience needs for effective communication and documentation. In the realm of professional or academic communication, lexical items are not the only formal means of metadiscourse, which is defined by A. Chrismore as

“the linguistic material intended to help the reader or listener organize and interpret information in texts” [1, p. 43]. There is a relatively wide range of phrasal, clausal and even sentential structures expressing different semantic meanings and functioning as hedges and boosters. Informed consent documents, while crucial for transparency and patient autonomy, often grapple with balancing detailed risk disclosure with clear communication. Presenting potential complications in stark, uncompromising terms can raise anxiety, while downplaying risks undermines patient trust. This is where interactional metadiscourse markers, and first of all, hedges and boosters emerge to create a well-balanced text, subtly modulating the force of statements.

This paper aims to elucidate the semantic and pragmatic functions of *if-clauses* serving as a hedging tool in the texts of informed consent templates for dental procedures, as the latter have not received sufficient scientific attention yet [3].

This descriptive and exploratory study aims to investigate phenomena as they naturally occur in the text. The corpus included 50 original informed consent templates (ICT) for dental procedures used in the USA healthcare settings authorized to render oral and dental services. The templates were searched for by the Google search engine and obtained from internet sources as Open Dental Software, American Dental Association dental records reference, Delta Dental Incorporation.

There has been substantial conceptual and empirical research focused on hedging. Much is understood about the semantic and formal aspects of epistemic devices, with a particular emphasis on modals. Hedging is considered to be genre-specific and is used to meet specific macro-level expectations, or achieve certain micro-level intentions, but always adheres to specific norms and constraints of the genre. According to F. Salager-Meyer, hedging is a socially constructed concept and, therefore, is an acquired linguistic tool that renders linguistic behavior more socially acceptable within specific social contexts [4, p. 179]. In our study, we adopted Hyland's functional definition of hedges that are employed to "qualify a speaker's confidence in the truth of a proposition [...] which we routinely add to our statements to avoid commitment to categorical assertions" [2, p. 143]. Additionally, we emphasize the role of hedges in differentiating facts from opinions, promoting qualities such as "honesty, modesty, and proper caution" [5, p. 54], and facilitating varied reader perceptions.

Conditional *if-clauses* are common non-lexical means with hedging functions identified in the ICTs. Predominant majority of sentences including *if-clause* are the first conditionals, which are used to express a future situation that is likely to happen if a certain condition is met. An *if-clause* can act as a powerful hedging tool, subtly affecting both the meaning and impact of your communication. The semantic analysis of the sentences with *if-clauses* has

demonstrated that they can present another possibility alongside the main statement, acknowledging uncertainty or alternative outcomes. For example: *An impacted wisdom tooth can cause a number of problems if not removed. If any unexpected difficulties occur during treatment, I may refer you to an oral surgeon, who is a specialist in dental surgery.*

By introducing alternative scenarios through *if-clauses*, the authors acknowledge the potential for unforeseen circumstances without creating undue alarm. This fosters a more realistic understanding of treatment possibilities while upholding patient autonomy.

The *if-clauses* in the ICTs are also exploited to lay out the conditions under which the main statement might hold true that allows for flexibility and avoiding absolute statements. For example, *Tooth decay, periodontal disease, inflammation of the gums or permanent markings (e.g. decalcification) may occur if patients consume foods or beverages containing sugar, do not brush and floss their teeth properly before wearing the Invisalign products.* Specifying conditions under which certain outcomes might occur allows for a more comprehensive picture of risks. This avoids blanket statements while highlighting key factors influencing treatment success.

Regarding the pragmatic functions of *if-clauses*, the study has enabled us to obtain the following results. By introducing an *if-clause*, the force of the main statement is softened, resulting in a less assertive or definitive tone. This proves valuable in delicate situations or when there is a desire to avoid making direct claims. The inclusion of the *if-clauses* indicates a lack of complete confidence in the main statement. This expression of tentativeness can be interpreted as an openness to considering alternative perspectives. For example: *If the root canal fails, I may need additional treatment or the tooth may need to be removed. If an instrument breaks off during scaling or root planning, it may be necessary to retrieve the broken instrument surgically.* This conveys an awareness of external factors that are crucial for achieving the desired outcome. Moreover, the employment of the *if-clauses* contributes to a more collaborative and interactive tone, encouraging the patient to contemplate the conditions, treatment options, etc. presented in the ICTs. This approach fosters a sense of shared understanding and has the potential to minimize potential disagreements.

Understanding the nuanced interaction between the healthcare setting / authority and patient influences the choice of language for informed consent and is essential for establishing trust and fostering patient autonomy. Hedging is a significant resource for clinicians in anticipation of the reader's possible rejection of their propositions. *If-clauses* among other hedging devices serve as a versatile tool for navigating uncertainty and maintaining a nuanced tone in the doctor – patient communication. Their ability to introduce alternatives, specify conditions, and express tentativeness allows healthcare professionals to convey their message effectively while softening its absolute strength. This

can be particularly beneficial in complex situations or when dealing with sensitive topics referring to health decision. Most of the if-clauses found in the ICTs are the first conditionals that mark greater degree of certainty in the prediction thus marking a content-oriented hedge.

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#### Kukushkin V. V.

*Candidate of Philological Sciences,  
Associate Professor at the Department  
of English Philology and Foreign  
Language Teaching Methods  
V. N. Karazin Kharkiv  
National University  
Kharkiv, Ukraine*

#### Кукушкін В. В.

*кандидат філологічних наук,  
доцент кафедри англійської  
філології та методики викладання  
іноземної мови  
Харківський національний  
університет імені В. Н. Каразіна  
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