**SOME STYLISTIC NOTES ON PATIENT INFORMATION LEAFLETS**

What is a Patient Information Leaflet and why is it useful?

The Patient Information Leaflet (PIL) is the leaflet included in the pack with a medicine. It is written for patients and gives information about taking or using a medicine. It is possible that the leaflet in your medicine pack may differ from this version because it may have been updated since your medicine was packaged. (<https://www.medicines.org.uk/emc/product/1159/pil>)

What is a patient information leaflet in stylistic/linguistic terms?

Idea of genre, a recognizable communicative act primarily characterized by a set of communicative purposes that it is intended to fulfil (Bhatia 1993: 13). Communicative purposes shape the idea of genre.

Patient information leaflets can be seen as a sub-genre which belongs to the more general genre of ‘instructive’ texts. Its main aim is to provide useful and clear information on the use of medicinal products in order to allow patients to use medicines in a way that is appropriate for their own health problems. Thus, they are a communication medium between experts and non-experts, in particular between doctors and patients.

Like all specialized texts, patient information leaflets share some proprieties with highly specialized medical texts - the most evident shared characteristic is represented by the use of technical lexis. However, when a specialised language is used in expert-layperson communication, it loses some of its characteristics and becomes ‘closer’ to natural language, e.g. technical terms may be substituted by words which belong to the general lexis, or technical terms may appear together with glosses or periphrases written in general language, or technical terms are explained through definitions, metaphors, analogies or examples (Cortellazzo 1994).

The two examples of patient information leaflets display a number of stylistic devices and patterns, such as **modality**, **politeness**, **hedging** and **graphology**, but a peculiar characteristic is **enumerating** and **exemplifying**, two textual functions that have some paradigmatic effects:

1. The whole family arrived to welcome us: Mum, Dad, Uncle Prakash and the twins [enumerating: a literary list]

2. The whole town was there: the Mayor and his wife, the city councillors and representatives of every trade and business you could imagine [exemplifying: a not comprehensive list, an exaggeration]

Lists in English are fairly straightforward in formal terms but very different in pragmatic effects. Three-part lists are frequently symbolic of completeness:

3. [Obama speaking of his wife in his victory speech]: the rock of our family, the love of my life, the nation’s next first lady

4. Liberté, égalité, fraternité [Fr]

5. I came, I saw, I conquered [*Veni, vidi, vici* – a Latin phrase attributed to Julius Caesar]

6.The way to get fit is eat less, do more exercise and sleep well.

In reality three-part lists are not comprehensive, and often tend to supplant real content, particularly in contexts where positive image-making is seen as important, especially in political texts such as government websites or campaigning materials:

7.Communities and Local Government’s vision is to create great places where people want to live, work and raise a family.

8. It: ‘Le tre I: impresa, internet e inglese’

On the contrary, four-part lists, and indeed any list with more than four items, are taken to be literal and usually explicitly complete in contrast with the default tendency to view three-part lists as symbolically complete.

In advice literature, typically we do not find enumerating but exemplifying, with explicit markers:

9. You may feel unwell. For example, you may have a headache or suffer from fainting episodes.

In this case, the writer does not need to list all possible variants and the reader understands there might be other symptoms.

Medicines however are obliged by the law to list all the symptoms that the company producing the medicine is aware of, and of course this results in not exemplifying but enumeration:

10. Ibuprofen side effects

Get emergency medical help if you have signs of an allergic reaction to ibuprofen: sneezing, runny or stuffy nose; wheezing or trouble breathing; hives; swelling of your face, lips, tongue, or throat. Get emergency medical help if you have signs of a heart attack or stroke: chest pain spreading to your jaw or shoulder, sudden numbness or weakness on one side of the body, slurred speech, leg swelling, feeling short of breath. Stop using ibuprofen and call your doctor at once if you have: changes in your vision; shortness of breath (even with mild exertion); swelling or rapid weight gain; the first sign of any skin rash, no matter how mild; signs of stomach bleeding - bloody or tarry stools, coughing up blood or vomit that looks like coffee grounds; liver problems - nausea, upper stomach pain, itching, tired feeling, flu-like symptoms, loss of appetite, dark urine, clay-coloured stools, jaundice (yellowing of the skin or eyes); kidney problems - little or no urinating, painful or difficult urination, swelling in your feet or ankles, feeling tired or short of breath; low red blood cells (anaemia) - pale skin, feeling light-headed or short of breath, rapid heart rate, trouble concentrating; or severe skin reaction - fever, sore throat, swelling in your face or tongue, burning in your eyes, skin pain followed by a red or purple skin rash that spreads (especially in the face or upper body) and causes blistering and peeling. Common ibuprofen side effects may include: upset stomach, mild heartburn, nausea, vomiting; bloating, gas, diarrhoea, constipation; dizziness, headache, nervousness; mild itching or rash; or ringing in your ears.

This list is not only an attempt to be *complete*, but also acknowledges that there may be other members of the set of symptoms which it has not listed. Note that there is a well-recognised effect of this legal requirement, which is the anxiety that it causes in the patient who reads the list and may anticipate the worst effects of the medicine happening to him/her (cumulating effect of listing).

Enumerating in other domains:

Consider the hyperbolic effects of enumeration in other genres and discourses, for example:

-*Gargantuan and Pantagruel*, by French author François Rabelais (16th century), with the probably longest list of foods and drinks in any type of literature, including:

11. Legs of mutton, with Ribs of pork, with Caponets. shallots. onion sauce. Caviare and toast. Olias. Roast capons, basted Fawns, deer. Lumber pies, with their own Hares, leverets. hot sauce. dripping. Plovers. Partridges and young Flamingoes. Herons, and young partridges. Cygnets. herons. Dwarf-herons. A reinforcement of Olives. Teals. vinegar intermixed. Thrushes. Duckers. Venison pasties. Young sea-ravens. Bitterns. Lark pies. Geese, goslings. Shovellers. Dormice pies. Queests. Curlews. Cabretto pasties. Widgeons. Wood-hens. Roebuck pasties. Mavises. Coots, with leeks. Pigeon pies. Grouses. Fat kids. Kid pasties. Turtles…

- *The Infinity of Lists* (*Vertigine della lista*), an art book by Umberto Eco entirely written in a listing style ⇒ abundant, plentiful, overflowing, massive, but also exasperating and ungraspable

Lists of three are not so common in unprepared speaking, but you should look out for them in any language data you want to study.