CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 Purpose and Scope of the Study

English is popularly acknowledged to be the international language in a number of disciplines ranging from medicine to sport. A survey carried out by Maher (1986) shows that the use of English is increasing and that English appears to have growing intranational and international currency in medical communication.

Medical journalism has been and is of vital importance for the international diffusion of knowledge and new ideas. The rapid rate of acquisition of new knowledge has contributed to the proliferation of medical journals. Over 2000 are listed in Index Medicus, with the majority in the English language. The type of articles that are found in a journal are editorials, reviews, original articles, case reports, brief communications and letters to the editor.

Members of the medical profession have a social responsibility to update their medical knowledge, and the medical literature remains a major means to achieve this goal. Journal articles allow significant observations to be made everywhere throughout the world for
example, newer forms of treatment, new lines of patient
management by any member of the medical profession who
wish to contribute. Previously, it depended on a few
surgical geniuses to advance the field of surgery. In
the process of writing a book, one has to have suffi-
cient material, find a publisher etc. but with an arti-

cle, one is able to communicate information to others
more easily. Surgeons are also busy clinical people and
if there is no simple way that would enable them to
write their observations, the wealth of information
would not be recorded and only be restricted to a few,
both of surgical genius and with the ability to write
whole books. Surgeons, in general, are not academics but
clinical people. They are different from pure scientists
who are geared towards a method of scientific inquiry
and recording their findings. Surgeons perform an opera-
tion with the purpose of curing people and a surgeon may
consider a job to be complete when he has cured his
patient.

Writing conventions adopted by specific
disciplines yield writing styles that are unique and
interesting to researchers of language and of pedagogic
value to those within the particular discipline, hence
the preference to this rather than general academic
articles.

The purpose of this study is to determine how
surgeons use language and how language is structured for
use in medical surgical articles. The medical surgical
articles found in two international journals are analyzed by the methods of descriptive linguistics in order to discover the characteristic discourse structures and features that comprise these articles. What are the discourse structures and syntax which are unique to medical research articles? It is expected that the discourse structures and grammar will distinguish this type of writing from general writing or other types of specialized writing. The articles found in newspapers can be distinguished from reports of business organizations, articles written in the humanities also show variations from scientific articles. The characteristic structures and features which are the concern of this study are distinctive enough to show how medical surgical writing differs from all the others. The discourse structures and features are related to the communicative role or purpose of the user. Medical surgical articles are found to be suitable for empirical research because they provide a large corpus of homogeneous writing which has the same overall purpose, reporting of research, and which is formally structured into distinct rhetorical divisions, enabling comparison across broad rhetorical functions. It is also associated by certain shared features and is recognized by those who use it. Thus, we can determine how the users of this language view what is appropriate. A descriptive list of categories for each section of an article is offered together with the occurrence of the patterns of moves identified and the
language used in the moves.

1.2 The development of medical research articles

Medical publishing began with the Renaissance when the development of new technology led to the printing and publication of books. During the scientific revolution that followed in Europe, the new generation of scientists initially brought their work before the public in published books. The language that was mainly used in the books was Latin which was the lingua franca of the time. In England itself, the publishing of medical matters in books took place later. By the end of the eighteenth century, English had almost replaced Latin as the language of medical communication in the English-speaking world.

The publishing of medical papers began in the proceedings of learned societies and the language that was initially used was usually Latin. From the middle of the nineteenth century, journals have increasingly reflected the advances made in medicine and the development of specialization and as a result, the specialist journal arose.

In Britain, many physicians submitted papers, often in Latin, to the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society to inform others of any new discoveries. For the first time, a review committee was formed to review all papers that were submitted to enable that the standard of articles was maintained.
New journals started to make their appearance in the United States in the nineteenth century and many of them were regionally based. Many of the journals supported their own institutions and had reprints of the British literature. The greatest expansion into specialist journals occurred in the United States in the twentieth century. The emergence of a specialty arose from groupings of practitioners who wished to seek an identity for themselves and be independent from others. Each group would found a journal to publish material that was of interest to their own particular group.

After the Second World War, there was a dramatic increase in the number of journals. In the United States, this arose because of the increase in the staffing of the medical schools and the generous funding from the National Institutes of Health. The staff were motivated to write by the grants offered for research and for continued employment.

English has not always been the dominant medium of international communication in medicine. There have been earlier lingua francas such as Sanskrit, French, German and Chinese, as can be seen in some journal titles, with the most powerful medium traditionally being Latin.

The increasing eminence of the British and American medical literature slowly gave rise to English becoming the major language for medical publication. By
the 1930s, English was without a doubt the most universal language for medical and scientific communication (Booth, 1990). Maher's survey found that the overall volume of biomedical publication in the countries surveyed has increased and seems likely to continue to increase in the future, an increasing number and percentage of journal articles published in the countries surveyed are in the English language and that English would appear to be used widely as the official language in countries where English is not the mother tongue, in the sense that domestic, intranationally distributed journals of biomedicine are published in English (Maher, 1986:212).

Maher also found that of the 373 meetings of international conferences, all but one used English where papers of quality can be heard or read. Furthermore, in many countries, papers are regularly published in English for domestic consumption, for example, in the Malaysian Medical Journal, as a means of having the potential to cater for an international readership.

From the above, it can be seen that the study of the medical research article is necessary and would be beneficial to the discourse community involved in the production and understanding of written medical discourse.

1.3 A description of medical research articles

Medical surgical articles represent a fairly narrow but important type of medical writing, one which makes relatively little use of personal constructions. The writers of medical surgical articles can expect a
particular audience profile. The writing caters to a small audience with the same interests and affiliations who have the same well-defined intellectual aims, values and practices. They are familiar with the type of writing which their own community of writers use. In this kind of writing, language constitutes the whole of the ongoing activity in the social situation and because the nature of the discourse is decontextualized, it has to be very specific. The writing in medical surgical articles illustrates that language is purposeful behaviour. The writers of the articles produced the articles to achieve a purpose, which is to inform others in the medical community of their findings and to contribute to medical knowledge.

Examining the immediate situation according to the four variables of field, mode, role and formality will provide some useful guidelines at the outset of the analysis.

The field can be defined as the communication of medical knowledge. It is highly specialized and involves considerable medical and surgical knowledge. The subject matter is quite specific and narrow in scope. It is fully comprehensible to those familiar with its particular field of activity.

The mode is that of a restricted, one participant monologue written to be read by others of the same background and expertise, in other words, from the same speech community. There is no visual contact between
writer and reader. Feedback is to be obtained only later, after publication of the article.

The role which specifies the social function of the language event is that of language used to convey new medical knowledge to others and to give information.

The formality dimension helps to define the personal and social relations between the participants involved and in this instance, their contact is through work and there is considerable distance between them, both in terms of space and social and personal relations. The writer of the article is the dominant participant.

By knowing the above information, we are able to predict some of the linguistic patternings that are likely to occur in this type of writing. We would expect a rather narrow range of possible meanings and technical words particular to surgery. There will be quite a number of medical and surgical terminologies and possibly high lexical density as a means of giving information. We may expect a preponderance of passives and past tense and the choice of the declarative from the mood system. We can, however, not be explicit without applying a discourse and linguistic analysis. Without analyzing the actual discourse structures and lexicogrammatical output and relating it to the information on field, mode, tenor and formality, we will still not know which situational factors determine which kind of selection from the linguistic system.

8