CHAPTER 9 Grammatical metaphor

ANSWERS

1 Making sense of nominalisation in unfamiliar text

• Component loosening and infection = ‘components loosen and something infects them’
• The complaint = ‘patients complain’
• Impairment of function = ‘something impairs the function (of the hip joint)’
• The diagnosis = ‘doctors diagnose the problem’
• Loosening = ‘the components may loosen’
• Infection = ‘something infects the components’
• Bone absorption = ‘the body absorbs bone (into the blood)’
• Distal migration of the femoral component = ‘the femoral component migrates distally (i.e. away from the point to which it is attached)’
• The treatment of these complications = ‘doctors treat these complications’
• Specialisation = ? (see comment below)
• Investigation = ‘doctors investigate something (the problem)’
• Blood culture: ‘doctors culture blood (i.e. test it to see whether bacteria or fungi are present)’
• Aspiration = ‘doctors aspirate (suck out) something (?blood)’
• Immobilisation = ‘doctors immobilise the joint’
• The prompt administration of the appropriate antibiotics = ‘doctors administer the appropriate antibiotics promptly’
• Resolution = ‘doctors resolve the problem’

There is one further nominal group which you may have included:

• Radiographic appearance: I omitted this because I feel that it refers to a product rather than a process (compare ‘his surprise appearance at the ceremony’, where it more clearly refers to the process of appearing).

The cases which I did not understand are:

• Bone absorption: I did not know whether this meant that bone absorbs something or something absorbs bone (it is the latter). I had to check online to find out what it is – it is also more commonly known as bone resorption.
• Specialisation: I still do not understand this! At first, I thought it perhaps meant that the doctors need to be specialists in treating this particular condition; but it may mean that the treatment is specialized – i.e. it is focused on a very specific area of the body and/or is particular to the treatment of this condition. Or neither of these guesses may be correct.
- aspiration: here I am not sure what is aspirated. Usually the procedure is done with bone marrow to check for infection in the blood, which would make sense here; but I have come across references to blood aspiration as a procedure in surgery, and it is unclear whether ‘blood’ modifies only ‘culture’ or also ‘aspiration’.

Note that I deliberately attempted to work out the clause paraphrases using my own knowledge, and I only checked online after my first attempt (and in some cases this did not help much!). The readers for whom the text was written will normally, of course, have no difficulty in understanding the text: the nominalisations which cause problems for me as a non-expert are established technical terms in the field. But this may serve as a reminder how much we tend to take for granted when we read specialist texts in our own field.

2 Identifying nominalisation in more familiar text

I have not included ‘meaning’ as a nominalisation, even though it is clearly derived from the verb ‘mean’, because it is primarily used in the extracts to refer to a product rather than the process of making meaning.

_from the textbook_

If we think in terms of the meaning being expressed, we can see that, just as with the first example, we can ‘translate’ it into something like:

Whenever people compare statistics about the north and the south, they find that the north is significantly poorer than the south.

This way of expressing the meaning is intuitively closer to what we can think of, in over-simple terms, as the physical and mental events in the external world that are being represented: we know that it is people who compare statistics and interpret what they find. But in terms of transitivity the representation is very different. In the original, the process of ‘comparing’ is represented as an entity or location from which something else can ‘emerge’ of its own volition; whereas the re-worded version represents it as an event involving human participants which results in those participants understanding a phenomenon. Using the terms introduced above, we can say that the ‘translation’ is more congruent – in other words, the term congruent can be informally glossed as ‘closer to the state of affairs in the external world’.

The metaphor is no longer simply in the non-congruent use of a lexical item (as was the case with ‘crippled’); instead it is in the grammar (which, amongst other things, makes it more difficult to do a transitivity analysis that captures the meanings adequately). In simple terms, nouns congruently encode things, and verbs congruently encode happenings. The original wording above is an example of grammatical metaphor because there a noun (‘comparison’) encodes a happening, and a verb
emerges’ encodes a complex meaning which is only partly a happening: it also involves the logical relation of cause and effect (‘as a result of comparing, people find’). We can therefore give a provisional definition of grammatical metaphor as: the expression of a meaning through a lexico-grammatical form which originally evolved to express a different kind of meaning. The expression of the meaning is metaphorical in relation to a different way of expressing the ‘same’ meaning which would be more congruent. This description is deliberately formulated in a broad enough way to include cases like the declarative command in the first example above.

from the academic article

The researcher is elided from this sentence in (at least) three ways. The first resource that the writer draws on for this purpose is nominalisation. One of the consequences of construing a process as a ‘thing’ is that mention of the participants involved in the process becomes structurally optional. Here the nominal group ‘every statistical comparison’ can be ‘paraclaused’ (i.e. paraphrased as a clause) as ‘every time someone compares the statistics’: the ‘comparer’ has been elided from the nominalisation. The second resource is passivisation: this involves elision of the Agent by whom the comparison ‘can be made’. With passivisation, it is easy to probe for the elided participant (‘Who by?’); and even with nominalisation, recovery of the participant is relatively easy (particularly by means of congruent expression of the process as a verbal group – ‘Who compares the statistics?’). In other words there are traces in the text of the participant, as inherent arguments of the verb.

In the case of the third resource, on the other hand, recovery is less straightforward: the eliding of the participant is more radical. The reconfiguration of meanings brought about by the nominalisation allows the interpretation of the results of the comparison to be represented as ‘emerging’ from the comparison. Of course, interpretation in this way depends on there being an interpreter – a more congruent wording would be: ‘every time someone compares the statistics they understand that the north is significantly poorer’. However, recovery of the participant who interprets means a more radical recasting of the wording than with nominalisation or passivization. It involves the reconstruction, at least in part, of a plausible version of a physical and mental event (people looking at statistical data and drawing conclusions) which is referred to in the clause. The arguments of the verb ‘emerge’ do not map at all onto the participants in this event, and it is only by reference ‘outwards’ to that event that identification of the potential participants which have been elided is possible.

3 Discussing nominalisation in more familiar text

The most obvious difference between the two extracts is simply in the number of nominalisations: 10 occurrences of 7 different lexical items in the textbook (or, more technically, 10 tokens and 7 types) compared with 24 tokens and 13 types in the article (I count ‘elision’ and ‘eliding’ as alternative forms of the same item.) Some nominalisations appear in the postmodifiers of another nominalisation: e.g.
‘The reconfiguration of meanings brought about by the nominalisation’, where ‘nominalisation’ is part of the postmodifier of ‘meanings’ which itself is part of the postmodifier of ‘reconfiguration’. A very crude measure of how this difference in the density of nominalisations affects the discourse is that the textbook extract has 36 finite verbal groups in 363 words (i.e. just over one per 10 words) whereas the article has 25 finite verbal groups in 331 words (i.e. just over one per 13 words). The article thus packs meaning into fewer finite clauses, partly because some of the potential clauses have been expressed as nominalisations.

It is also noticeable that the groups centred around nominalisations in the article tend to be more complex, in that they are more likely to have postmodifiers which realize elements that would be participants, or sometimes circumstances, in a clausal paraphrase. This reflects the fact that the nominalisations in the textbook are mostly (with a few exceptions) ‘ready-made’ standard technical or sub-technical terms in the field such as ‘analysis’ and ‘description’, while more of those in the article are specially ‘tailored’ for the context. It would of course be difficult to talk about the topic without using the ready-made terms, and these do appear in the article as well (most obviously ‘nominalisation’ and ‘passivisation’). The ‘tailored’ instances, on the other hand, suggest that the writer has chosen to express the ideas in the form of nominalisations rather than of clauses – e.g. ‘congruent expression of the process as a verbal group’ rather than ‘we express the process congruently as a verbal group’, or ‘the reconstruction … of a plausible version of a physical and mental event’ rather than ‘we reconstruct a plausible version of a physical and mental event’. It is worth noting that two of the more complex groups centred around nominalisations in the textbook extract occur when a definition is being presented. It is a fairly well-established convention that definitions of nouns are given in the form of nominal groups rather than clauses. This means that, in a sense, the choice of a nominal form offers itself to the writer as the most natural; and, since the noun being defined is itself a nominalisation and therefore has a process meaning, it is natural to use a nominalisation in the definition. The use of a clause here would be the marked choice.

Some of the tailored instances also function textually to encapsulate a preceding clause as the basis for the next proposition, in a way that is typical of more formal academic writing. For example, ‘recovery of the elided participant’ encapsulates ‘it is easy to probe for the elided participant’, and ‘identification of the potential participants which have been elided’ encapsulates ‘The arguments of the verb “emerge” do not map at all onto the participants in this event’.

The two extracts, while both broadly within the domain of academic discourse, therefore represent different degrees of uncommonsensical construal of the topic, as reflected especially in the use of nominalisations. The textbook is consciously written to be accessible to readers who are at a fairly advanced stage of handling complex text but who are not yet experts in the field. Greater use of nominalisation in presenting an unfamiliar topic might therefore be an unwelcome extra obstacle to easy understanding. The article, on the other hand, is written for peers who are assumed to be familiar with the linguistic concepts being discussed. In addition, in Western academic culture a heavily
nominalised style is generally valued as demonstrating that the writer has an appropriate command of the expected register. (In fact, in the version that was published, I converted some of the nominalisations into clausal form, feeling that I had perhaps gone too far!)