

SPECIFIC FEATURES OF SPORT COMMENTARIES IN ENGLISH

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Sport is usually on the back page of our newspapers, away from all the serious stuff like war, politics and scandal. It is placed in a world of its own. And people involved in sport often like to claim that it is outside the web of issues which make up our culture. Sport is tied in with the complex systems of human behaviour that we call “*society*”. To understand how sport is represented to the public, we need to look at the language that is used and the values and associations which come with that language. In doing this we shall gain a greater understanding of sport’s place in society and how it reflects the values that society holds.

Anyone interested in language would not be surprised to observe that sports terms become the metaphors for all kinds of everyday events and activities. For example, an issue that politicians debate is a political football, to begin something is *to kick off*, to give up is *to throw in the towel* (boxing), a list of participants is a *lineup*, to speak on someone’s behalf is *to go to bat for them*.

The significance of sport communication consists in the fact that sport is an enormous sphere of human activity that includes various problems – social, political, financial and others. Due to mass media – press, radio, television - millions of people are involved in sport communication. Especially important is the role of television that makes the spectators the immediate participants of the sporting event.

This article reveals the general characteristics of sport commentaries and examines the structural features of TV football commentaries considering their phonetic, lexical, grammatical and stylistic features. The material analysed is a football match *Real Madrid versus Arsenal (2010)*.

The two central values of sporting television – realism and entertainment – are always in conflict as the overall aim of TV sport is to convey maximum action in minimum time. The extent to which the sport naturally satisfies the aim determines how much transformation should be done to the language using the resources offered by television. Sports commentary is the basis for broadcast sport.

Sports commentary is a form of unscripted commentary which requires the commentators to speak “off the cuff” as they describe and comment upon events as they happen. Although commentators have individual styles, they have a great deal in common in their use of English, which is why unscripted commentary can be described as a variety of spoken English. It is presumed that television and radio commentators use plainer English, but for most of the time, they use a “common register”. Despite the fact that the register adopted by commentators contains many specific words, they still have to talk in an understandable manner as their audience is a wide and varied one. Utterances must be carefully organized because the audience cannot ask for clarification, and they are often made up of short, uncomplicated units.

The discourse of the sports commentary is a specific substyle of public speaking style and can be characterized as a spontaneous spoken variety of language; whose tenor is formal, public and impersonal; the domain is sport; the domain functions are informational and expressive.

One of the most well-known characteristics of sports commentary is its speed. There is usually a great variation of speed in any sporting event commentary and this feature indicates something of the relationship between language and the action it reports upon.

The most important feature of sport commentary is the absence of the feedback with the addressee. The commentator has no opportunity to transform his speech tactics taking into account the viewers’ reaction, he can only be directed by his own experience and intuition.

A TV-transmitted football match is a discourse. The discourse is closed, in as much as every televised football match has a beginning and an end. A TV football commentary is a monologue or dialogue-on-stage directed at an unknown, unseen, heterogeneous mass audience who voluntarily choose to listen and watch and provide no feedback to the speaker. Therefore, the real significance lies in football commentary itself.

In football commentary the main form of narrating consists of describing who is controlling the ball. In football, one important function of utterances is therefore to describe possession. This has to do with the nature of the game itself. The primary object is the ball. The commentary follows the ball, not the players, because the commentary follows the camera and the camera follows the ball.

Any football commentary performs four functions:

1. Narrating: Describing what is happening play-by-play;
2. Evaluating: Giving opinions about play, players, team, referee decision;
3. Elaborating: Giving background information about team and players, comments on the behaviour of the crowd, speculating on motives and thoughts of the players;
4. Summarizing: Giving an overview of the game so far.

The language of sports commentary is highly dependent on a number of extralinguistic factors which have their impact on the choice of the phonetic, lexical, grammatical and stylistic features of any sports commentary.

The type of the sporting event: the sport commentary of a football or hockey match will certainly differ from the commentary of a horse racing or billiards which is accounted first of all by the nature of the sporting event itself;

The channel of the commentary: the commentary on television will certainly differ from the radio commentary due to the presence of the visual element in the former channel and its absence in the latter one;

The degree of personal involvement and experience of the commentator;

The importance of the event: the less important the event is the less impressive and involved the commentary will be.

The phase of the sporting event commented. The speech of the commentator changes depending on the situation in the sporting event. Comparatively static moments in the game are accompanied by a detailed description of the weather, the participants, the place of the event, etc. At dynamic climax moments his speech becomes more capacious and the verbal information acquires conversational features.

The style of the commentary depends on whether it is a live sporting event commentary or a post sporting event one when the results of the game are already known.

The number of commentators: there may be a single commentator who comment on any stage of the sporting event or two commentators one of which usually narrates the event stage by stage and the other being an “expert” provides comments and opinions.

It is important to add that David Crystal distinguishes two separate forms of commentary naming them “play-by-play” commentary and the “colour-adding” commentary. He defines “colour-adding” as “pre-event background, post-event evaluation, and within-event interpretation”. In contrast “play-by-play” is the method used to describe actual events that are happening as the commentator sees them.

E.g. In the commentary under analysis a number of “colour- adding” phrases are used such as “*good-looking goal*”, “*aesthetic the play go here*”, “*it is not easy, no, not*”, “*quick, impressive, still young, and still learning*” (*Real Madrid versus Arsenal, 2010*).

It is undeniable that the most important aspect of commentary is how it sounds. Sports commentary has a distinctive intonation pattern and without the varied intonation of the commentator, sport commentary would be rather boring. If something exciting happens on the pitch, the commentary gets excited, the commentator speaks faster and his pitch increases. So, high arousal usually leads to a higher fundamental frequency and a faster speech tempo. The tempo varies greatly: at climax moments it increases greatly. Likewise, if an attempt on goal, for example, ends in failure, the mood turns very much to disappointment: the speech slows, and the pitch drops. Descending scales, falling and level tones are predominant: the announcement of the goal is always characterized by a high falling tone, passes are informed with a falling or level tone.

Sports commentary can usually be identified by its prosody. Even when the words themselves cannot be heard, the fact that the speech in sports commentary is discernible even through a closed door as the event and the accompanying commentary picks up speed, the commentator both reflects and communicates this excitement by using a higher segment of his natural pitch range, with a marked drop down into the lower reaches of his pitch range as the event ends and things return to the normal range.

A second notable element of sports commentary “*tune*” is the way in which pitch differences in a speaker’s voice are used to create pitch contours which give utterances different meanings. These contours operate over what

have been termed intonation units, which are units of information that are often roughly equivalent to clauses in length but that could be longer or shorter depending on factors such as speed of speech or position of pauses.

As it has been mentioned the speech we hear in sports commentary is unprepared. So, in unprepared speech an intonation group seldom coincides with a sense group as the speaker often has to stop to arrange his thoughts. Pauses are often optional and there are a lot of hesitation pauses.

In general all the commentaries retain a high degree of fluency throughout. For instance, where normal conversation is marked by hesitations, self-corrections, false starts, fillers, and incomplete sentences, sports commentary is very fluent. This would suggest that it is an acquired skill and although it sounds spontaneous, it has to be learned and practised. Moreover much of the language is not spontaneous, despite the fact that it is sometimes presented as such. Nevertheless, one should accept that there are cases of non-fluency, too. Richard Lappin brings an example from the Manchester (radio) transcript, where Mike Ingham says "*so far f-what a ball*", which is an example of a false start. Also in the same commentary Alan Green and Bryan Hamilton speak at the same time and this leads Green into saying "*sorry Bryan*", which disrupts the fluency. But in general all the commentaries retain a high degree of fluency throughout (Richard Lappin, South Hunsley School, 2000).

There are a number of other interesting features concerning the way the information is presented to the viewer (or listener).

Firstly, it would appear that a common way for commentators to commence speaking is to start by saying "*well*". This happens on several occasions by most commentators on both mediums, acting as a "start" button for the beginning of speech.

Secondly, the text genre of live football commentaries can be described in terms of various sub-parts depending on the importance of information. Background information is spoken either in a narrating or in an elaborating style, whereas building up suspense and presenting a climax has been characterised as speaking dramatically.

Commentators also regularly use metaphors to add excitement to their commentary and bring the viewer deeper into the game. The events on the field are often explained in terms of war, dominance, strategy and in many other

ways. Some of these metaphors are so deeply embedded in the way that we describe sport, that we fail to notice them consciously as metaphors.

In football, for instance, we refer to “attack and defence”. The attack “shoots” for goal, and the “shot” can be “off target”. When the game is drawn, it is decided by a decisive penalty “shoot-out”. The opponents often “defend enemy territory”, etc. These examples are very vivid and add life to the commentary.

Another aspect of how metaphor can help our understanding is that it can fill lexical gaps. If there is no appropriate word available for describing a concept, a metaphor can serve instead. For instance, in the domain of football, a defender is a player who tries to keep the opposing team from scoring.

There are many words contained in the semantic field of football. Although all the words are related to football, not all are exclusive to it. Indeed, this is one of the main problems that semanticists face - grouping words under a particular category. The definition of the word *wall* is that of a “vertical construction made of stone, brick, wood etc....used to enclose, divide or support.” However, in the semantic field of football it refers to a line of footballers used to protect their goal from an opponent’s free-kick.

Also noticeable is the list of collocations. These often link two or more common words together to provide a technical term. Examples of this include *free-kick* and *penalty-area*, *football league*, *giant-killing act*, *different ends*, *unlikely draw*, *packed crowd*, *whistle blew*, *achieve a draw*, *go head-to-head*. Both, when separated into their original words have a separate meaning to that of when they are joined together. When put together in the context of football, they form a lexical item with a meaning particular to football.

There are many other types of formula found such as the scoring formulae. For example, “one one” or “two nil”. In TV commentary the viewers are reminded of the time, the score and the television channel.

E.g. *Over half way is through ...*

It is level of half time and the reflection on the first 45 minutes.

A common feature of “play-by-play” commentary is the way in which the commentator omits words.

E.g. *Ronaldo, good pass... Clichy, Alonso, Ozil*. In conventional written English this would read *Ronaldo made a good pass... Clichy passes to Alonso, Alonso passes to Ozil*.

The commentator is able to omit certain words because his intended audience is an interested and knowledgeable one and so he only has to describe the most important features of the play; player (Clichy), direction (to), and receiver (Alonso)

The commentator does not have to mention passing because everybody understands what is going on. Furthermore, if he was to describe every piece of action fully, the next piece of action would be over before he could begin to describe it. This habit of leaving things out that would normally be expected in the clause structure is called ellipsis. In particular, we see ellipsis of the verb *to be*.

E.g. *Alonso down the left hand side* is used instead of *Alonso is down the left*

hand side. Here the verb *is* is dropped.

In 'play-by-play' commentary the commentator describes what is going on as he speaks. Therefore, he tends to use the simple present tense a lot.

E.g. *Now Fabrigas breaks rule here!*

Now they play the danger.

This may appear obvious, but in ordinary conversation, the norm is the present progressive tense. This is still used in commentary but not to the same extent as the simple present tense.

E.g. *He is running...*

He is going to get on the ground...

When referring back to an incident that has just happened the commentator normally uses the simple past tense.

E.g. *Van Percic tried to show his classic still again.*

Sagna passed him the ball.

The present tense is used far more often than the past tense. Not only does the commentator do this because he is describing events as they happen, but it also adds drama, life and excitement to the viewing experience.

One of the grammatical characteristics of the TV commentary is the way in which clauses are linked together. A very small number of conjunctive elements are used to link clauses together, often rather loosely. In this commentary *and*, *but*, *so* are seldom used. The former two link elements of the similar grammatical status. *As* is somewhat different, since it serves to introduce a subordinate clause.

E.g. *Here's Fabrigas, he is running, he goes and he hang on to that somehow,*

(pause) and it is good run...

The commentators use a number of exclamatory sentences expressing their emotions concerning the game, sentences with the inverted word order,

E.g. *Well, aesthetic play go here!*

It's not easy, no, not!

The phonostylistic analysis of the TV sports commentary has revealed the following phonetic, lexical, grammatical and stylistic features:

1. A wide range of pitch and loudness is characteristic of the commentary depending upon what is happening in the field.

2. The prosodic feature of the sport commentary vary depending on a number of factors, such as the character of the event, commentator's professionalism, the model of the commentator's verbal behaviour, etc.

3. The language of the football commentary is characterized by a subject specific vocabulary and collocations. This would suggest that it is an acquired skill and although it sounds spontaneous, it has to be learned and practised.

4. Simple tenses are used, most often Present Simple Tense which make the commentary highly dramatic

5. The metaphors are used for adding excitement to the commentary, filling lexical gaps and bringing the viewer deeper into the game.

The two central values of sporting television – realism and entertainment – are always in conflict as the overall aim of TV sport is to convey maximum action in minimum time. The extent to which the sport naturally satisfies the aim determines how much transformation should be done to the language using the resources offered by television. Sports commentary is the basis for broadcast sport.

Key words: *sport, communication, sport commentary, unscripted commentary, play-by-play commentary, colour-adding commentary, descending scales, falling and level tones, prosody, tune, metaphor, the prosodic feature of sport commentary, pre-event background, post-event, evaluation, within-event interpretation*

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Գ. Ֆ. ԲԴԵՅԱՆ

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Սույն հոդվածը նվիրված է անգլերենի սպորտային մեկնաբանությունների լեզվական, քերականական, ոճական, հնչյունաբանական և առոգանական առանձնահատկությունների վերլուծությանը: Հոդվածում ընդգծվում է սպորտային մեկնաբանությունների կարևորությունը հեռուստատեսային ժանրում և անդրադարձ է կատարվում հեռուստատեսությամբ և ռադիոյով հեռարձակվող սպորտային մեկնաբանությունների լեզվաբանական առանձնահատկությունների՝ հիմնվելով ֆուտբոլային մեկնաբանության վրա: Հատկապես կարևորվում են սպորտային մեկնաբանությունների արտալեզվական գործոնները, ինչպես նաև ներկայացվում են տարբեր լեզվաբանների մոտեցումները սույն թեմային:

ОСОБЕННОСТИ СПОРТИВНОГО КОММЕНТАРИЯ В АНГЛИЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

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Статья посвящена анализу особенностей лексического, грамматического, стилистического, фонетического и просодического анализа спортивного комментария в английском языке. В ней подчеркивается важность спортивных комментариев в телевизионном жанре и рассматриваются лингвистические особенности спортивных комментариев, транслируемых по радио и по телевидению, на основе особенностей футбольного комментария. В особенности подчеркивается важность экстралингвистических факторов спортивного комментария, а также различные подходы лингвистов к данной теме.