

# Sport as the Essential Social Construct and Equally Essential Language of Sport

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**Abstract:** *The article deals with the influence English has in sports discourse and explores the interaction between sports and language (English in particular). Considering the characteristics of the sport language as a whole, the paper highlights both the linguistic description and the influence that emphasis has on the genre. On this account, two aspects are underlined: the language of sports and its special features (lexical items and sentence structures) and the rhetorical strategies in sports communication (used to entertain or to express emotion). The aim is to underline to what extent the language of sports is labeled as “special language” on the one hand and how attitude is expressed and considered a peculiarity of this language, revealing the linguistic forms by which groups identify themselves. In conclusion, the paper confirms that the language of sports does have special features, having its own framework, and should get more interest from linguistic studies, above all for what concerns genre analysis and sociological studies.*

**Keywords:** language of sports, specialized language, linguistic strategies, communication strategies, genre analysis.

## 1. Introduction

English language has an important role as a word donor in any everyday language. In Italian it is true from the very common “ok” to words such as “welfare”, “mouse”, “toast”, “week-end” or words that sound like English (esp. in politics the word “deregulation”) but are not used with the original meaning (or in extreme examples are meaningless). Not only world languages are permeated by English, small languages such as Serbian are also trapped by dominant English to name but a few : antenna , deep wing, final whistle, flag pole, header , holding and pushing, scissors, in the register of sports.

One of the fields that is considered to better assimilate English terminology seems to be sports, maybe because of its global market system. Words like “curling”, “fitness”, “spinning” or “surfing” do not have an equivalent and local correspondents and are very rarely used by those who for nationalistic reasons or language purism, tend to use their own language. As for Serbian language initial assumption is that the lexical and morpho-syntactic potential of Serbian, as a receiving language, often gets neglected or misused in an effort to comply with the standard of English, as a giving language.

However, these kinds of efforts often have to step aside for fashion reasons: a newspaper would never talk about “*Pallacorda*” (the Italian equivalent for “tennis”), “*Basketballspiel im Freien (auf Strassen)*” (a German locution for “street ball”). Indeed, globalization and the multicultural society play their role and there is no condemn on the use of borrowings and loanwords in a purist linguistic direction that can turn this trend back.

It is certain that the influence of English affects other language systems, in every field and in sports in particular. The question is: “Why is English so appealing?” There are of course linguistic reasons but they seem to be concealed

under some cultural aspects. In Germany, English influences the local language because of a sort of “linguistic submissiveness” (Onysko, 9), in Italy because of the great appeal the *American Way of Life* has towards the national model, being a sort of national myth originated during the Second World War period. In Serbian, everything coming from the West is considered to be a priori correct, the best and most adequate and as such is readily embraced and put into use. The answer may also concern linguistic reasons, as English often provides words that are more concise, charming, sound better or fill better the newspaper or the reporter’s needs.

English words sometimes are used because they are “fashionable” or because the local language equivalent offers a counterpart that has no attractiveness at all (as in the case of the recent popular sport “curling”, that translated in Italian would be “*piastra sul ghiaccio*”). Sociolinguistic reasons involve the “youth factor” being English the language commonly used everywhere, the language for communication, the “*lingua franca*” employed for chats, advertisements, music and several other uses. Using English is appealing from the point of view of a teenager (and appealing to those who address to teenagers or teen-modeled adults) because it makes them feel part of a selected generation, the global one, where English plays the role of a special key to be “in” the group.

Also, English, specifically American English, is the language of a population that for many countries (not only for Italy) represents the “social dream”, bringing with itself the myth of richness, freedom, self confidence, authority (an idea that has originated in the last century for political and cultural reasons). The preference on the use of anglicisms in sports communication may have its origin simply in the place of birth of the majority of modern sports (which is USA for sports such as surfing, beach volley, street ball; or England for more “classical” sports such as cricket, rowing or golf). So the question “why is it so appealing?” has certainly a

polychromatic answer that starts with linguistics considerations and involves other factors that have semantic, cultural and sociolinguistic reasons.

## 2. The language of sport

From what has been said, it is certain that English influences the language of sports, and this is a real and definite fact for almost every language. However, what can be considered as “language of sports”?, what are its peculiarity, what its structures?. The language of a particular field must reflect the needs and the objects of that field. So, for example, the language of medicine must be concise and effective, with linear linguistic expression, legal language must be conservative, slow to change and formulaic though it must permit negotiation.

The language of sport is something between code and jargon, it is certainly a vivid language that must represent the double aspect of sports: sport is in fact a physical activity (so the language must have technical lexemes that refer to equipment, special movements and techniques) and a social pastime (so it is an entertainment, which has its products that go from TV programs to big fanzines distribution). Both aspects contribute to a large and rapid-to-change vocabulary formed by specialized terms and multileveled words, influenced by advertisements, journalistic and sport markets. Considering the above mentioned double aspects of sport, it could be interesting to study the linguistic features on the one hand and the effects of the connected popularization on its semantics, syntax and its communication forms (rhetoric and pragmatic aspects) on the other.

## 3. Communicative aspects of the language of sports

### 3.1 What do we communicate through sport?

In this paper the label “language of sport” is used to define the language of sport events, to talk about sports or to describe sports. However, it is important to underline that the label would sound inappropriate, in so far it is clear that sports language is not a “language” in any meaningful sense of this term. It may be considered a special language not only because it displays special features, for lexical and syntactical aspects, but also because of its communicative aspects.

The language of sports can be studied either examining it as a special language in itself, a code applicable to every local varieties (meaning here, European languages as well as other languages); or considering it as a particular aspect of a local language, used to define a particular field, with usage and characteristics other than the everyday language.

It could be interesting to compare the different use of the language of sports in the most common languages (taking into account the globalised communication rules) and see if there are meaningful differences to propend toward one of the two possibilities. At the moment, the language of sports as a unique entity is considered and analyzed. Taking into

account that English is the *lingua franca*, the focus is in English variety, although other languages’ contributes are considered. It is not exclusively a matter of lexis, as the language of sports has also very special syntactic characteristics.

Also, there is another aspect that must be considered, which is the difference between the language of sport used for technical use and the language of sport used for communication and entertainment (mixing journalistic rules and media aspects). Grammatical constructions vary considerably as between technical and entertainment language. The latter is highly sensitive to the reporter’s style or to the sport and its audience. Very common features imply:

- Prepositional phrases which emphasizes the sentence mixing the word order, E.g.: “at no time”, “little”, “never”
- Introductory clauses to stress the attention on the second clause, E.g.: Liverpool’s long wait for a home league (...) finally ended on Saturday *when* Ryan Babel came off the bench to give them a deserved (...); Russia won its fourth Fed Cup (...), *when* Svetlana Kuznetsova beat Anabel Medina Garrigues, (...); *It’s been* far too long,
- Quoting format, used to report coaches, athletes’ or public opinions, e.g.: “The defending was very poor for both goal” said United manager Alex Ferguson “But overall they were the better team”; Benitez said: “We showed character quality (...)”,
- Past tense used to report the action in the game, E.g.: “Keeper Edwin Van der Saar *gifted* Liverpool an equalizer after 27 minutes when he *parried* Xabi Alonso’s long shot directly against the legs of Brown and it *flew* straight in for an own goal”,
- Grammatical faux pas:, E.g.: the boy done good, we was robbed, Conversational echoes:, E.g.: “You kind of grow up”, “Let’s not lose our minds with Aaron Rodgers just yet”,
- Cliché talk that offer verbal economy, taking formulae, E.g.: “It’s the belief and the confidence”, “For too long we’ve been off the pace”,
- Massive use of personal pronoun to communicate group identity or to create the myth, E.g.: “*We* were the better team”, “*I* gave her a chance to get back”, “*I* guess *I*’m back”,
- Sequential Progression, so the topic in sentences are always different, as the comment of one sentence becomes or derives the topic of the next., E.g.: “Carlos Tevez had put United ahead after three minute, with a Wes Brown own goal leveling before Babel struck 13 minutes from time to secure their first home win against United for seven years”,
- Adjectives are very important because of the emphasis, E.g.: “The *wild* challenge”, “The *vastly experienced* winger”, “*Volcanic* emotions”, “*Crazy* pitcher”, “*Vicious* stuff”,
- Massive use of acronyms, e.g.: “NBA”, “AAU”, “NCAA”, “NFL”.

On a syntactic level, passives, extra position and there- constructions, are often used to manipulate clauses in such a

way as to render them more or less ironic (irony is a way to build and confirm group identity). Extra position is used for strategic reasons: the highly used semi-formulaic packaging (forms like: “it should be seen”, “it is possible that”) permits not only to place the important information at the end of the sentence (increasing expectancy and dynamism) but also helps the massive use of hedging (which, as it has already been shown by several linguists, is the clearest way to express the author’s opinion toward a topic, keeping a misleading veil of objectiveness and impersonality).

This rough panorama of grammatical items in the language of sports leads to what can be called “popularization” of the language. Simple structures, present or simple past tense, grammatical mistakes seem to make the language poorer: an explanation might be the fact Sports Newspapers have a largely working-class readership and they are written using simple grammar structures and echoing conversational faux pas.

Consequently, it is important to note that this kind of journalistic behavior tends to modify the language, because of the vast amount of readership and because newspapers have been always associated with the highest prestige of language.

### 3.2 English working for the language of sports

English has a great relevance being an efficient donor in almost every sport in every country. The influence is so great that it is impossible nowadays to read a newspaper, a sport report or anything for that matter without coming across some English words. Words like “Tackle”, “To cross”, “Pivot”, are now considered so entangled within the local language (May it be Italian, German or Dutch) that the national equivalent is impossible to recall.

Sometimes these words are “nationalized” as in the case of the Italian “*Crossare*” (Italian word for “to cross”) a term to indicate a particular passage performed by the soccer player. This concept cannot be expressed in Italian unless a paraphrase is used. Conciseness is of course one of the reasons why English has this strong appeal toward other languages: English is in fact for its own nature a language that obeys the law of semantic economy, which is particularly important in situations like journalism or sport reporting. Also, English seems to have a wider range of terms to define what in other languages has just one simple word. For example, the Italian word “*campo*” can be translated in different ways according to the sport context: (It.) Campo: \_ (Eng.) Field, \_ (Eng.) Court, \_ (Eng.) Ground.

English then seems to offer specialized terms that can be chosen accordingly to the context. This characteristic helps making the language more appropriate in the use of the specialized terms. Also, in the language of sport we realize the presence of global loanwords and calques, so the French word “*volée*” (tennis semantic field) is used both in English and in Italian, the English word “*to stop*” is used in Italian and French and the Italian word “*cucchiaio*” (soccer Italian jargon) appears in English newspaper as well, although the English proper expression to define the action is “Banana

kick”. There are also words employed in everyday language that can have different meanings if used in a sports context:

- Ace: In tennis, a serve made by a player that is so good that the other player cannot return the ball
- A playing card with a large single symbol on it
- Love: In tennis, a score of zero
- A strong feeling
- To serve: In tennis, to begin to play by throwing the ball in the air and hitting it towards the opponent
- To work for somebody
- The favorite: A person or a team that is considered most likely to win a competition, match, race etc.
- A person or a thing liked more than others.

On the “entertainment” account, it is obvious that the marketing of the news, the interest created by sport events and the manipulation over sport factory create a sort of “world inside the world”. That is, the world of sports generates an interest in the technical events (the game) and an interest that goes beyond the game and concerns what is “around” the game: the match intended as a challenge between two opponents (or against oneself), the players’ private lives, the coach federation relationships (better if they’re turbulent), the market, the engagements, the players’ health situation or their bank accounts. From the linguistic point of view, this kind of interest (produced by what can be called “metasport”), produces a double line where technical terms appear together with words that must be analyzed in their multilayered meaning, words that belong to other semantic fields and that are employed to maximize the emphasis on a concept or to simply “entertain” the reader (or the report listener).

These words become the basis on which the sport romance is written, where facts and myths are mixed together to create a fake world that fans take in. Thus words translates the frustrations of the fans that explode through a verbal aggressiveness, so texts (in newspapers and in fanzines in particular, fight songs etc.) can be irreverent or even offensive because the main goal is to sensationalize, to express violence and an emphasis on the opponents. This vivid language uses element of nationalism or localism (above all using stereotypes like “Miami Heat rookie”, “the Kansas State power forward”) or terms borrowed by other semantic fields (from family, food, music, animals, magic or religious field). e.g.:

- A victory for her *extended family*
- The whole shape of his *mission*
- A *delicious* point
- He played a *symphony*
- The *three-headed monster* of McFadden, Bush and Fargas ran for (...)
- A revenge against the *fate*
- We know we can *beat* anyone; (...) we are in *action*.

To finish with a whole sentence:

- No need to *summon* those others. Zambrano was the *magician* Sunday night.

- He made the Astros' bats *disappear* and *created* the *illusion* that the *hope* surrounding the Cubs this year might actually be *real*.

Many sports terms are metaphorical in origin and it is also true that sports have been giving during this century a huge support in the growth of everyday language:

- To skate on thin ice - to do something risky (from skating)
- Fishing for compliments - to try to get compliments (from fishing)
- Under the belt - unfair.

#### 4. Conclusion

In summary, the language of sports employs a large plateau of lexical items, Technical terms: referring to equipment, special movements or organizations or techniques. E.g.: "dog pile", "split-finger", Everyday word with special meaning: (not technical terms but stratified lexemes). E.g.: "the roof of the net", "passaggio telefonato" (very slow passage), Calques: a word borrowed from another language by literal translation E.g.: "Pallavolo" – "Volleyball", Jargon: Used by the media to report on sporting events E.g.: "He had no-hit stuff" (someone with a great repertoire of pitches, in baseball), Borrowings: from other semantic fields, especially from the military language E.g.: The *defeat*, the *soldier*, the *Emperor* (talking about a Brazilian soccer player).

The register varies as between the vast amount of sports. While soccer, for example, implies vivid language to shock the reader or make him believe it is a matter of important fight between two or more "soldiers", tennis always refers to loyalty and respect for the adversary ("the opponent" in the selected report). Lexical items definitely signal one's membership of a group and sociolinguistic research could carry out important studies to help understanding this complex world that generates happiness and solidarity but also street fights and violence.

##### 4.1 Pedagogical implications

The above mentioned examples of sports related language seem to be universally spread across the languages of the planet. There is no single pore or walk of life which is not permeated by sports expressions, sports idioms, sports phrases, sports metaphors.

What we as teachers can do is to equip our students with this specific register of sports language knowledge so they can understand everyday English language and become competent sports writers. Not that they are given a choice, they indeed have to tackle the problem from the very start of their studies by compulsory use of English language from the onset of their first year of studies.

Sports related degrees whether of the first, second or third cycles, are increasingly internationally appealing and we have to be ready for the international student's body admission. We as teachers are the one to quench their thirst for knowledge and being English language teachers is

simultaneously a great honour and a great responsibility. The inevitable conclusion is that we have to live up to the students' expectations and therefore we have to introduce them into the wealth of English language in the register of sport and sports related sciences as soon as possible.

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