**Demarcating information: Setting up drills and giving instructions in sport**

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## 1. Coach talk

Sport is action. It involves running, kicking, jumping, tackling and all manner of physical interaction. But learning these actions involves more than just doing them; it also involves talking about them. To understand how players progressively learn to perform at the highest levels, we need to understand how coaches engage with players, build solidarity with them and instruct them into how to play (Walsh et al. 2024). This paper will consider how coaches talk in ways that help players learn. In particular, it will consider how coaches set up drills to support players in practice, and how they give instructions about these drills.

As its action-based nature suggests, one of the key features of sports language is that it is highly dependent on the physical situation in which it is spoken. It involves referring out to objects, people and activities that are in the situation and it heavily relies on gestures to convey or illustrate its meanings. It is also typically created in moment-by-moment decisions that are not planned before-hand. These features collectively give it strong context-dependence – what has been variously described as *language-in-action* (Martin 1984), *language-as-ancillary* to the situation (Halliday & Hasan 1985), *stronger semantic gravity* (Maton 2014) or *stronger presence* (Martin & Matruglio 2020). This heavy dependence on the physical situation means that the meanings being put forward draw upon a range of different resources, with particular emphasis on the role of prosodic phonology and paralinguistic gestures (Abercrombie 1968, Cléirigh no date, Ngo et al. 2022, Ariztimuño 2024) in relation to broader linguistic patterns (Doran, Caldwell & Ross 2021).

Such highly context-dependent language raises the question of how coaches organise their information to ensure their instructions are understood and followed. In the following text, for example, a beach volleyball coach is setting up a drill called 'bagger' involving six players. This is primarily done through language, but as the informal glosses in brackets […] make clear, this is complemented throughout by physical action and gesture.

| i | Coach: | Alright. Young verse Old. Bagger. |
|---|---|---|
| ii | Coach +Players: | Yeeeeaaaaah, Fox [clap] [Team cheer, hands together moving up on *yeah* and down on *Fox*] |
| iii | Player 1: | you say bagger? |
| iv | Coach: | Yeah. |
| v | Player 2: | Isn't that when you [points with finger]… |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| vi | Coach: | Alright. Draw in, uh, [traces a line] draw in a short court. Make it, Make it about three metres; not, not fully halfway. |
| | | [illustrates the action they need to do] |
| vii | | Can I grab those Naamah? |
| viii | Player 3: | [Throws balls to coach] |
| ix | Coach: | Alright, one touch, forearm only. |
| x | | Which line is your short court? [traces line while pointing] |
| xi | Player 4: | [draws line in the sand] |
| xii | Coach: | Alright. We'll play to eight, then back it up long court to fifteen. |
| | | [throws ball over the net] |

**Text 1. A beach volleyball coach setting up a drill**

Through this stretch, the coach regularly shifts between speaking to the whole group and to individual players or smaller sets of players. This is illustrated in Table 1, where the text is shown in sequence, with shifts in who is being spoken to indicated by different columns (who is being *convoked*, Doran, Martin & Zappavigna 2025).

| | Coach | | Players and Coach together | Players |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **To whole group** | **To individual players** | | **To coach** |
| i | Alright. Young verse old. Bagger | | | |
| ii | | | Yeeeeaaaaah, Fox [clap] | |
| iii | | | | you say bagger? |
| iv | | Yeah | | |
| v | | | | Isn't that when you… |
| vi | Alright. Draw in, uh, draw in a short court. Make it, make it about three metres; not, not fully halfway. | | | |
| vii | | Can I grab those Naamah? | | |
| viii | | | | [Throws balls to coach] |
| ix | Alright, one touch, forearm only. | | | |
| x | | Which line is your short court? | | |
| xi | | | | [Draws line in sand] |
| xii | Alright. We'll play to eight, then back it up long court to fifteen. [Throws ball over net] | | | |

Table 1. Coach talking to the whole group or to individuals

In addition to shifting between speaking to the whole group and to individuals, the coach also 'shifts gears' in terms of the aim of what they are directing the players to do. This is marked in

Table 1 above by a dotted horizontal line. Initially, they name the drill the players will be doing, *Bagger*, and the players in each team, *young versus old*. Then the coach specifies the court set up, directing the players to draw the court at a particular length: *Draw in a short court… Make it about three metres, not fully halfway*. Following this, the coach specifies the rules: *one touch, forearm only* (i.e. the players can only touch the ball once when it comes on their side, and can only use their forearms – a 'dig'); and then sets up the scoring system: *We'll play to eight, then back it up long court to fifteen*; before finally the coach begins the play by throwing the ball over.

There is a lot going on in this short stretch. The coach is coordinating language and physical activity; they are engaging with different people; and they are directing players to do different things. Nonetheless, there is no confusion about what is happening; the players and coach are all on the same page. The question for this chapter is how this coach manages to organise their information in ways that allow them to shift perspective clearly and succinctly, and to have their instructions understood and followed. We will explore this through what we will call *demarcation*, which concerns how a text such as this is chunked up into different informational stretches, either in speech or in writing.

## 2. Demarcation as a resource

In this chapter we will consider how demarcation occurs through the linguistic framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014). In particular, we will consider it as a resource within the register-variable *mode*. Mode refers to the role language and other semiotic resources play in a situation (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014; Halliday & Hasan 1985). In this chapter we will draw on a developing model that considers mode as a set of resources for organising information (Doran, Martin & Herrington 2024). This perspective complements views on mode considered in terms of relative context-dependence (e.g. Hasan 1973; Martin & Matruglio 2020) and those that consider different 'modes' in terms of channels or mediums (e.g. Halliday & Hasan 1985; Martin 1992). The model developed in this chapter aligns with recently developed models of the other two register variables: *field* as a resource for construing phenomena (Doran & Martin 2021) and *tenor* as a resource for enacting social relations (Doran, Martin & Zappavigna 2025). This is visualised in Figure 1, where mode is a component of register, which helps realise genre, and in turn is realised through language, including its discourse semantics, lexicogrammar and phonology.
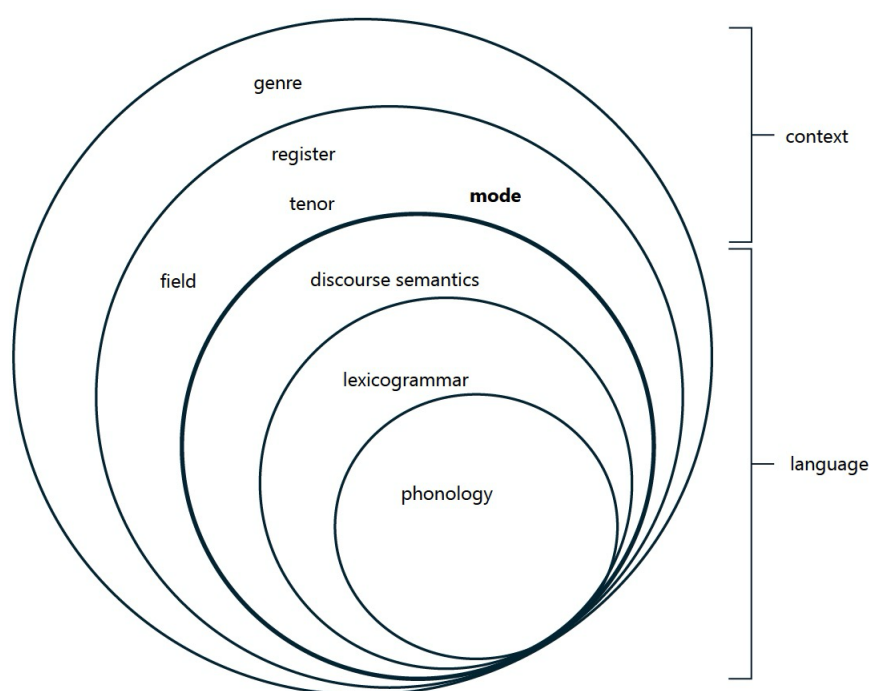
Figure 1. Mode as part of register in relation to genre and language.

The model being developed arises from the observation that information in language is organised through a wide-range of resources. In SFL terms, these include discourse semantic resources of periodicity for foregrounding and backgrounding meaning, connexion for linking text and identification for tracking participants (Martin 1992; Martin & Rose 2007); lexicogrammatical resources for the thematic and informational organisation of language (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014); phonological resources of intonation, rhythm and semogenic vocal qualities (Halliday & Greaves 2008; Abercrombie 1965, Ariztimuño 2024) as well as resources drawn from sonic and physical paralanguage and non-linguistic sound (e.g. whistles, throwing balls, physical actions etc.; Abercombie 1968; Cléirigh no date; Ngo et al. 2022). This is illustrated in Figure 2. The important point for us is that these resources do not work in isolation from each other. Rather, as we will see below, they work together to organise information such that a view of only one does not give us the full picture we need. Thus in this chapter we will consider resources of demarcation as being at a more abstract level to the discourse semantic (and thus to the lexicogrammatical and phonological) resources noted above. That is, we will consider demarcation as a resource within mode.
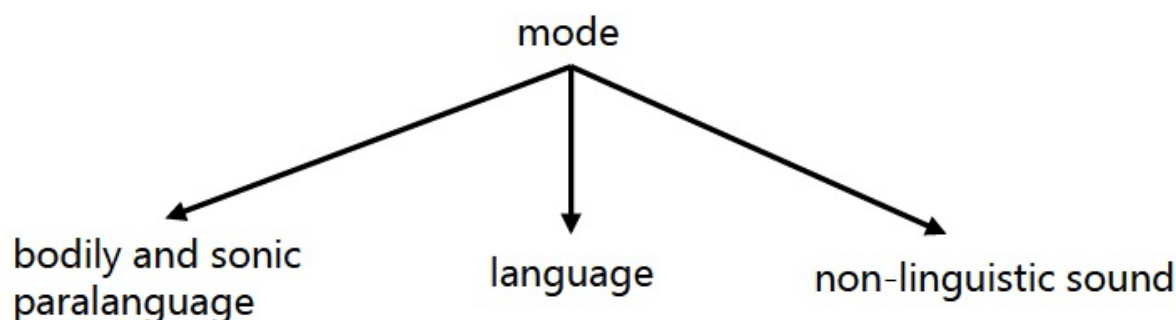


Figure 2. Mode as realised through the combination of linguistic resources, paralinguistic resources of sound and body language, and non-linguistic sound.

## 3. The drill genre

Drills in sport aim to train players in the skills they need to excel in games. They have a relatively stable generic structure typically involving three main stages: Set Up, Action and Reflection. The opening Set Up stage is heavily realised through language and involves the coach specifying what the players are going to do, how the drill will happen and potentially what they want the players to focus on while doing the drill. The following Action stage involves the players doing the drill itself. The Action is the core of a drill, where players do the actions specified in the Set Up, with language being relatively minimal and playing a supporting role (Doran, Caldwell & Ross 2021). Finally, the optional Reflection stage involves the coaches and players reflecting upon and evaluating how the drill went and what things could be improved.

The text we saw above was the Set Up of a drill in beach volleyball. It is realised through an embedded protocol genre (Martin & Rose 2008), which specifies the actions to be done and how the players are to do these actions. We can describe the staging of this protocol in terms of a Purpose, Equipment and Specifications structure, with the specifications including phases (Rose 2020a) of *rules* and *logistics* (Table 2):[1]

| **Purpose** | Coach: | Alright. Young verse Old. Bagger. |
|---|---|---|
| | Coach +Players: | Yeeeeaaaaah, Fox, [clap] [Team cheer, hands together moving up on *yeah* and down on *Fox*] |
| | Player 1: | you say bagger? |
| | Coach: | Yeah. |
| | Player 2: | Isn't that when you [points with finger]… |
| **Equipment** | Coach: | Alright. Draw in, uh, [traces a line] draw in a short court. Make it, Make it about three metres; not, not fully halfway. |
| | | [illustrates the action they need to do] |
| | | Can I grab those Naamah? |
| | Player 3: | [Throws balls to coach] |
| **Specifications** *rules* | Coach: | Alright, one touch, forearm only. |
| | | Which line is your short court? [traces line while pointing] |

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[1] Although protocols have long been recognised as significant genres in various pedagogical, legal and administrative contexts, there has been little agreement on their generic structure. Different descriptions are given by, for example, Wignell and Boyd (1994) for workplace literacy, Iedema, Feez and White (1995) for administrative discourse, and Rose (2020b) for school-based literacy teaching. Indeed Martin and Rose (2008), in their otherwise thorough cataloguing of genre staging, notably do not offer a generic structure for protocols. Nonetheless there is agreement that protocols focus on the specifications or conditions that guide and/or constrain action and do not unfold temporally in sequence. The otherwise range of descriptions suggests the protocol genre is perhaps more diverse than recognised in any specific context.

| | Player 4: | [draws line in the sand] |
|---|---|---|
| *logistics* | Coach: | Alright. We'll play to eight, then back it up long court to fifteen. |
| | | [throws ball over the net] |

Table 2: Genre stages and phases of the protocol constituting the drill Set Up

The stages and phases of this protocol are realised by shifts in field – broadly, the content meanings – and tenor – broadly, the interpersonal relations being negotiated. In terms of field, the opening Purpose involves specifying the drill to be done – *bagger* – and the distinct teams involved – *young versus old*. The dialogue following this focuses on clarifying this activity (*you say bagger?*) and unpacking what it involves (*Isn't that when you…*). The Equipment stage shifts field to describing the court (*short court, three metres, not fully halfway [to the full court]*), and its 'construction' (*draw in a short court*, *make it about three metres*). The Specifications then shifts the field again, by giving the rules of how the game will be played (*one touch*) with what part of the body (*forearm only*) and the logistics in terms of scoring (*we'll play to eight then back it up long court to fifteen*).

In terms of tenor, as shown in Table 1 above, each stage and phase opens with a proposal from the coach commanded to the whole team: *Young versus old. Bagger; Draw in a short court; One touch, forearm only; We'll play to eight then back it up long court to fifteen*, with the players then responding by either doing the action or clarifying its meaning.

The key point for this chapter is that these shifts in field and tenor do not occur on their own. Rather, they occur with resources of mode that package them up and mark them as distinct chunks of information. In doing so, the coach presents their meanings in a way that supports players in understanding and following them. The way in which this coach packages up their information and demarcates it from other chunks of information is the focus of this chapter.

## 4. Demarcating information

To see how this coach divides the text up into different chunks of information, we will make a broad distinction between resources for:

- *demarcating* – where the coach marks a change in the text; and

- *maintenance* – where the coach indicates continuity of the informational chunk.

The coach draws on a wide range of resources for chunking the text. One of the most regular resources is through the use of connexion, which is a discourse semantic resource for connecting meanings together.[2] In particular, this coach draws heavily on the conjunction *alright* (an internal additive connexion of staging; Martin 1992: 221), positioned at the beginning of a phase or stage, and functioning clausally as a textual Theme (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014: 107), which is often used to indicate changes in texts. Table 3 presents the

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[2] CONNEXION is Hao's (2020) renaming of the discourse semantic system of CONJUNCTION (Martin 1992) so as to distinguish it from the word class.

thematic patterning of the text, with the *alrights* underlined. The distinct phases/stages are marked off with dotted horizontal lines, to show that each stage/phase begins with *alright*.

| | Speaker | textual Theme | unmarked Theme | Rheme |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| i | Coach: | <u>Alright</u>[3] | Young verse old | bagger |
| ii | Coach + Players | | | Yeeeeaaah, Fox. |
| iii | Player 1 | | you | say bagger? |
| iv | Coach | | | Yeah. |
| v | Player 2 | | Isn't that | when you… |
| vi | Coach | <u>Alright</u> | Draw | in uh |
| vii | | | Draw | in a short court |
| viii | | | Make | it |
| ix | | | Make | it about three metres |
| x | | | | not, not fully halfway |
| xi | | | Can I | grab those Naamah? |
| xii | | <u>Alright</u> | One touch | forearm only |
| xiii | | | Which line | is your short court? |
| xiv | | <u>Alright</u> | we | 'll play to eight |
| xv | | then | ø | back it up long court to fifteen |

Table 3. Thematic pattern of the Set up, with internal additive connexion *alright* underlined

The use of *alright* as a marked textual Theme strongly demarcates the text into chunks of information, in ways that realise stages and phases in the genre. Through this paper we will use the word 'chunk' to refer to stretches of information demarcated by resources in mode such as the *alright* here. Here we distinguish chunks from *stages*, which are structural elements of a genre, and *phases* as described by Rose (2020a; Martin & Rose 2008) (as well as rhetorical units as proposed by Cloran (1994), which can be read as comparable to phases viewed from Hasan's model of text structure). Being a unit within mode, chunks in this paper are primarily realised through textual meanings in discourse semantics and other strata, whereas phases in Rose's model are multi-metafunctional. We can thus argue that phases realise stages of genres and that chunks in any particular text may or may not be co-extensive with phases, working as they do with field and tenor to realise phases.

Because chunks are realised by textual resources more broadly, they are not limited to being marked by just connexion and thematic patterns. Table 4 shows that the coach also draws on phonological resources to demarcate its chunks.

Here, the intonation and rhythm resources drawn upon by the coach are added to the Table. Following Halliday and Greaves (2008) tone groups are indicated by double slashes //…// with rhythmic units of feet marked by single slashes /, and, following Abercrombie (1965), silent

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[3] *Alright, young versus old, bagger* is not in fact a major clause, but rather a string of minor clauses, and so does not have a Theme-Rheme structure. Nonetheless, the configuration of the elements clearly still abides by the thematic principle whereby the beginning of the configuration holds thematic prominence (Halliday 1985), with a textual element first (*alright*) and a topical form following it (*Young versus old*). As such, we have included it in the thematic analysis. The same principle applies for the *Alright, one touch, forearm only* below.

beats by a caret ^. Key for the discussion here are pitch movement in each tone group, indicated by the numbers 1-5. 1 represents a falling tone, often used to project certainty (typical of statements), and which we will see tends to end a chunk of information. 2 represents a rising tone, which is typical of yes-no questions, projecting uncertainty; 3 indicates a relatively level tone with a slight rise at the end, which is typical of lists and, as it often indicates incompleteness, is regularly used to maintain a chunk; 4 represents a fall then rise (often indicating tentativeness) and 5 represents a rise then fall (often indicating an assertiveness). The most relevant tones for us in this paper are tone 1 (falling) and tone 3 (relatively level), and so we have highlighted these in the extract below, with tone 3 groups being in italics and tone 1 groups in bold. We have also placed an asterisk before the foot containing the tonic syllable where the main pitch movement starts in each group.

| | Speaker | textual Theme | unmarked Theme | Rheme |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| i | Coach: | //1 **Al\*/right**/ ^ ^ | //3 *Young verse \*/old* //^ ^ // | //1 **\*bagger** |
| ii | Coach + Players | | | //5 Yeeaah, \*/ Fox// [clap] |
| iii | Player 1 | | //2^ you | say \*/bagger |
| iv | Coach | | | //1\*Yeah. |
| v | Player 2 | | //^ Isn't /that | when you/ [hand movement] |
| vi | Coach | //1 ^ **Al\*/right**// | //3 *\*Draw* | *in* // 3 *\*uh* |
| vii | | | //3 *Draw* // ^ ^ // | *in a \*/short court* |
| viii | | | //3 *\*Make* // ^ ^ // | *it//* |
| ix | | | //3 *Make* | *it a/bout /three \*/metres* |
| x | | | | //1 **not,/ ^ / not /fully /half \*/way** |
| xi | | | //2 Can I | grab \*/those/ Naamah// |
| xii | | //1 ^ **Al\*/right** | //3 *One \*/touch* //^ ^ // | //3 *forearm \*/only* |
| xiii | | | //13 *which \*/line* | *is your \*/short court* |
| xiv | | //1 ^ **Al\*/right** | //1 ^ **we** | **'ll/ play to \*/eight** |
| xv | | // 3 *then* | ø | */back it \*/up* // 1 **long /court to /fif\*/teen//** |

Table 4. Phonological and thematic organisation of the Set up

As this analysis illustrates, each of the *alrights* are said on their own tone group, primarily with tone 1. As Halliday and Hasan (1976: 272) note, giving tonic prominence to a conjunction such as *alright* highlights the additive nature of the new segment. In our terms, it emphasises the demarcation, that there is another chunk coming. Within each chunk, this analysis also illustrates very distinct uses of tone 1 (falling tone) to finish chunks of information and tone 3 (level tone) to continue chunks of information. We will look first at the falling tones. In line i), for example, the tone 1 falling on *bagger* indicates the end of the stretch introducing the drill that the players are going to do. Similarly in line x), the coach uses tone 1 to indicate the end of the instructions regarding how the court should be set up; and in xv), the coach draws on tone 1 to close the whole Set Up of the drill itself. As these examples show, in each case the chunks of information can be extended through questioning but in terms of the coach's instructions themselves, tone 1 is regularly used to end each section.

By contrast, tone 3 is used throughout this stretch to present the information in the tone group as incomplete and thus to maintain the flow of the information in the chunk. This aligns with Halliday's observation that tone 3 is often used to realise clause complexing relations (e.g. Halliday 1994; Halliday & Greaves 2008). For example, in line i), *young verse old* is said with tone 3 to maintain the chunk flowing until the final tone 1 on *bagger*; and from lines vi) to ix) the use of tone 3 creates a link across multiple commands: *Draw in, uh, Draw in a short court, Make it, Make it about three metres*.

As noted above, coupling with these connexion and tone choices are thematic choices. As we have seen, marked Themes tend to demarcate new chunks (in lines (i), (vi), (xii) and (xiv)) while predictable unmarked Themes tend to support the maintenance of a chunk, as in lines (vi) to (xi). This is one of the reasons why we can interpret the follow up question and answer stretches in lines (ii)-(v) and (xiii) as being in the same chunk as the lines before them, because they maintain a pattern of unmarked Themes. As this illustrates, the demarcation and maintenance of informational chunks are not the preserve of a single resource in language, but rather are realised across a wide range of resources. Those that we have seen so far include INTERNAL CONNEXION, THEME and TONE choices all working together. For this reason we describe demarcation as being a resource of mode, which abstracts from the resources of discourse semantics, lexicogrammar and phonology.

The discussion so far also illustrates that different resources tend to indicate different directions of demarcation and maintenance. Connexion and thematic resources tend to mark a chunk as distinct from (or the same as) the previous chunk. Using *alright* as a marked Theme, for example, indicates that coming stretch of language is distinct from the previous stretch; whereas using an unmarked theme and no internal connexion suggests the stretch is likely the same chunk as the previous. We can call this *retrospective* demarcation or maintenance. By contrast, tone choices tend to indicate a *prospective* demarcation/maintenance; they indicate that the current stretch of language is distinct from or the same as the following chunk. We can group these choices together as the system of JUNCTURE in Figure 3, which says that one can choose to demarcate or maintain a chunk and that either of these can be prospective or retrospective.
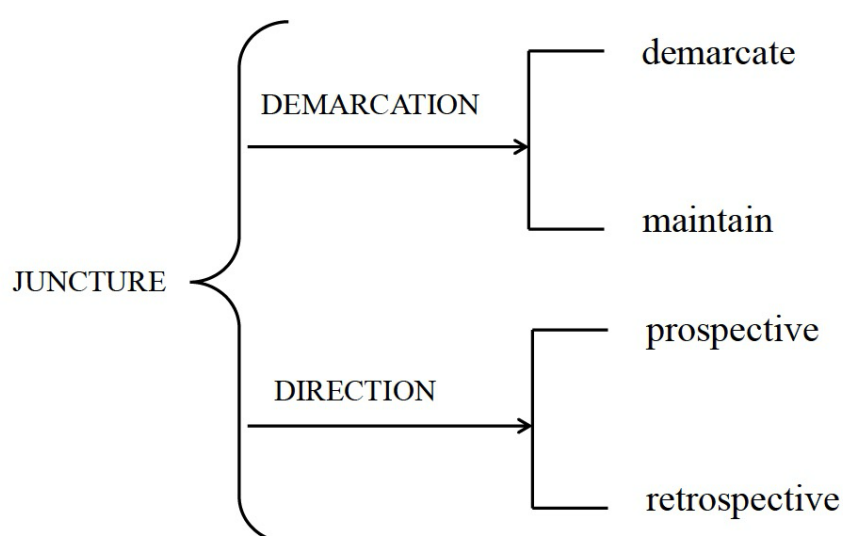


Figure 3. System of JUNCTURE

Bringing our analysis thus far together produces Table 5. This table illustrates that patterns of demarcation link upwards to patterns of genre staging and downward to patterns of language. In terms of genre, demarcation tends to occur at the boundaries of stages and phases indicating a shift in the text; while flows of maintenance typically occur within stages and phases to hold the text together. In terms of language, both demarcation and maintenance tend to be realised by particular patterns within the textual and logical metafunction across discourse semantics, lexicogrammar and phonology. In this way, demarcation functions as a means of linking genre patterns to language patterns.

| Staging + Phasing | | Speaker | textual Theme | unmarked Theme | Rheme | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Aim** | | Coach: | //1 <u>Al*/right</u>/ ^ ^ | //3 *Young verse */old* | **//1 *Bagger** | **Demarcate** |
| | | | | ^ ^ // | | *Maintain* |
| | | Coach + Players | | | //5 Yeeaah, */ Fox//. [clap] // | |
| | | Player 1 | | //2^ you | say */bagger// | |
| | | Coach | | | //1*Yeah.// | |
| | | Player 2 | | //^ Isn't /that | when you/ [hand movement] | |
| **Equipment** | | Coach | //1 ^ **<u>Al*/right</u>**// | //3 *Draw* | *in* // 3 **uh* | **Demarcate** |
| | | | | //3 *Draw* <br> // ^ ^ // <br> //3 *Make* <br> // ^ ^ // <br> //3 *Make* | *in a */short court* <br><br> *it*// <br><br> *it a/bout /three */metres* | *Maintain* |
| | | | | | //1 **not,/ ^ / not /fully /half*/way** | **Demarcate** |
| | | | | //2 Can I | grab */those/ Naamah// | |
| **Specifications** | *rules* | | //1 ^ **<u>Al*/right</u>** | //3 *One */touch* | //3 *forearm */only* | **Demarcate** <br> *Maintain* |
| | | | | //^ ^ // <br> //13 *which */line* | *is your */short court* | |
| | *logistics* | | //1 ^ **<u>Al*/right</u>** | //1 ^ **we** | **'ll/ play to */eight** | **Demarcate** |
| | | | // 3 *then* | ø | */back it */up* // 1 **long /court to /fif*/teen**// | **Demarcate** |

Table 5. Demarcation and maintenance linking language patterns with genre staging and phasing

Although the general patterns of demarcation and maintenance line up with genre stages and phases, there is one stretch that illustrates that this is not always the case. In the logistics phase at the end of the text, both lines have been marked in Table 5 as indicating a (prospective) demarcation. That is, from the analysis given so far, the following two lines should be demarcated into distinct chunks, but they occur within the same phase:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| //1 ^ <u>Al</u>*/right | //1 ^ **we** | **'ll/ play to */eight** |
| // 3 then | ø | /back it */up // **1 long /court to /fif*/teen//** |

The indeterminacy here arises from distinct couplings of language features that at first glance suggest *both* demarcation and maintenance. In terms of demarcation, the first line *we'll play to eight* is said on a falling tone 1, which we have described above as typically ending a chunk. Similarly, the second line begins with a marked textual Theme *then*, which we have suggested typically begins a chunk. Thus from this perspective, there is a demarcation between the two lines.

On the other hand, there is no phase or stage boundary, which suggests the two lines should form the same chunk. Similarly, when looking from around in terms of field and tenor, the two lines work together to realise a single (momented) activity in field – i.e. a single coherent sequence of events (Doran & Martin 2021) – and they can also be read as a single set of propositions that can be supported or rejected together (Doran, Martin & Zappavigna 2025). Further, there are language patterns that reinforce this analysis. For example, although there is a marked textual Theme *then*, this is a structural Theme in Halliday's terms (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 107-8) realised by a conjunction that is inherently thematic. This means that the *then* cannot be moved anywhere else and so its thematic impact is relatively small (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 125). Similarly, the topical Theme *we* is elided, indicating a continuity in Theme. The thematic choices thus pull both ways toward demarcation and maintenance. Compounding this, the ellipsis sets up a participant chain (Halliday & Hasan 1976, Martin 1992), where the *ø* refers back to the *we*. Although we have not looked at this in detail yet, we will see that such chaining is a common marker of maintenance.

The two lines, therefore, suggest both demarcation and maintenance. To account for this, we will suggest there can be chunks within other chunks. That is, we suggest that there can be different sizes of demarcation, where a stretch can be read both as coherent components of a larger chunk, and as distinct chunks in themselves. We argue that this is a feature of the periodic nature of textual meaning (Halliday 1979), where smaller waves of meaning can be overlaid onto larger ones.

## 5. Hierarchies of demarcation

To illustrate how coaches build waves of information onto others, we will look at another Set up of a drill from the same coach, shown as Text 2. As above, we have included both the genre staging and phasing.

| Staging + Phasing | Speaker | Text |
|---|---|---|
| **Aim** | Coach: | *whistle* |
| | | Alright. Are we happy to keep these teams? |
| | Player: | Sure |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Coach: | So two on two<br>Compulsory three contacts<br>No jumping<br>But you have uh baby balls |
| **Specifications** | *play* | | So if I'm playing the ball over at Villani<br>she's got to pass that one<br>she'd volleyball the volleyball<br>but she has to pass the baby before playing the next ball |
| | | | Make sense? |
| | | Player: | Yep |
| | | Coach: | Alright we've done different variations of it |
| | *logistics* | | I'll start the rally with an easy ball in |
| | | | Whichever team loses goes off, the third team comes on, on their side |
| | | | Keep your own score |
| | | | Suz [calling a name] |
| | | | So third team wait at the side cos you could come on either way |
| | | | So what's gonna be important in this |
| | | | *Hits ball over the net to start play* |

Table 6. Set up of a drill called Baby Balls, with genre staging and phasing.

Just like for the previous Set up, we can look at the combinations of connexion, Theme and intonation to see the flow of information through the text. As illustrated in Table 7, demarcation is again primarily realised through the staging connexion *alright* (underlined) as a textual Theme with chunks culminating on a falling Tone 1 (bold), and maintenance is realised through stretches of unmarked Themes and relatively flat Tone 3s (italics).

| Staging + Phasing | | Speaker | textual + interpersonal Theme | unmarked Theme | Rheme | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Aim** | | Coach: | *whistle* | | | |
| | | | //1^ <u>Al*/right</u> | //4 ^ Are we | /happy to /keep/ ^ / these */teams// | **Demarcate** |
| | | Player: | | | //1 *Sure// | *Maintain* |
| | | Coach: | //1*So | //3 *two on */two*<br>//^ ^// | //3 ^Com/pulsory /three */contacts | |
| | | | | | //3 *No */jumping* | |
| | | | **//1 But** | **you** | **/have /uh /baby /^ */balls** | **Demarcate** |
| **Specifications** | *play* | | //3 ^ *So if* | */I* | *'m playing the /ball over at Vi*/llani* | *Maintain* |
| | | | | //3 ^ *she* | *'s got to /pass */that /one* | |
| | | | | //3 ^ *she* | *'d /volleyball the */volleyball* | |
| | | | //3 ^ *but* | *she* | */has to */pass //1 ^* **the /baby** | |
| | | | **be/fore** | | **/playing the /next */ball** | **Demarcate** |
| | | | | //^// | | |
| | | | | | //2 Make */sense | |
| | | Player: | | | //1Yep// | |
| | | Coach: | //^ 3 <u>Al*/right</u> | *we*<br>//^// | *'ve //1* **done /different vari*/ations of it** | **Demarcate** |
| | *logistics* | | | //3 *I* | *'ll */start//3 ^ the*/rally//1 ^* **with an/easy ball */in** | *Maintain* **Demarcate** |
| | | | | //3 ^ *Which/ever team/loses* | *goes */off* | *Maintain* |
| | | | | *the* //1 **third team**<br>//^// | **comes /on on their */side** | **Demarcate** |
| | | | | **//1 Keep** | **your /own */score//** | **Demarcate** |
| | | | | | //3 *Suz// [calling a name]<br>//^^^ | |
| | | | //1*So //3 *third */team* | // 2 ^ /wait | at the */side | **Demarcate** *Maintain* |
| | | | cos | you<br>//^^^^ | could //1 **come on /either */way** | **Demarcate** |
| | | | // 1^ So | /**what** | **'s gonna /be im/portant in */this//** | **Demarcate** |

*Hits ball over the net to start play*

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Table 7. Demarcation and maintenance in the Aim and Specifications

As with the previous text, the first two stages/phases are relatively cleanly bounded with demarcations and are individually held together through maintenance. In the Aim, for example, after the whistle which starts the whole text, the coach uses *alright* to start the chunk, eventually drawing on tone 3s to maintain the chunk (//3 *two on \*/two* //3 *^Com/pulsory /three \*/contacts* //^ ^// //3 *No \*/jumping//*) before using a tone 1 to complete the chunk at the stage boundary (//1 *But you /have /uh /baby /^ \*/balls//*). In the play phase of the Specifications, following a marked textual Theme of *so if* (discussed below) as part of a thematized dependent clause (*So if I'm playing the ball over at Villani*), tone 3s are used to maintain the chunk (//3 ^ *So if /I'm playing the /ball over at Vi\*/llani* //3 ^ *she 's got to /pass \*/that /one* //3 ^ *she 'd /volleyball the \*/volleyball* //3 ^ *but she/has to \*/pass//*) before a tone 1 is used to demarcate it once more (//1 ^ *the /baby be/fore /playing the /next \*/ball//*). The phase is then extended through the dialogue before there is a final demarcation to shift the end of the chunk via the culminative tone 1 (//^ 3 *Al\*/right we've* //1 done /different vari\*/ations of it).[4]

The play phase also illustrates the importance of participant chaining within the textual system of IDENTIFICATION for holding together and splitting chunks (Martin 1992). In the following stretch, the coach refers to a range of participants – himself, the ball, Villani (a player), and the baby (a different ball). To show this, nominal groups referring to the ball are <u>underlined</u>, those referring to Villani are in *italics*, those referring to the coach are in **bold** and those referring to the baby (a different ball) are <u>wavy underlined</u>.

> So if **I**'m playing <u>the ball</u> over at *Villani*, *she*'s got to pass <u>that one</u>. *She*'d volleyball <u>the volleyball</u>, but *she* has to pass <u>the baby</u> before ø playing <u>the next ball</u>.

The important thing here is that the opening clause establishes three new participants that are presumed exophorically (i.e. they refer out to the physical situation; Halliday and Hasan 1976). This helps demarcate the phase because it makes clear that it is referring to a new set of participants from the previous chunk. Two of these participants – Villani and the ball – are then tracked through anaphora until the end of the phase. This is visualised in Figure 4, with participants organised clause by clause. Here a curved arrow indicates exophoric reference and a straight arrow indicates anaphoric reference back to whatever it is pointing to (Martin 1992). This also illustrates that *the baby* is the only participant that refers back to the previous phase, which helps the larger text hang together.

---

[4] Here we could in fact argue that this brief dialogic section constitutes a phase in itself, perhaps called a *checking* phase, that is complexed with the play phase. To justify this, we could draw on Cloran's (1994, 2010) description of dialogic text segments which Cloran describes in terms of rhetorical units within semantics but here can be interpreted as phases within genre, comparable to those described by Rose (2020a). Such a description would involve establishing a layered phase complex, with the *play* and *checking* phases forming a hypotactic series, and then working together to complex with *logistics* phase as a paratactic sequence, producing a structure of $1(\alpha^\wedge\beta)^\wedge2$. Extending this further could allow for the logistics phase to be divided into further layers of phases, focused on the change of team, the scoring, and the waiting. One justification for this is that these sections are jointly realised by chunks in mode, shifts in field and at times shifts in tenor. How far we should go in terms of layers of phasing in texts such as this has not yet been determined, but part of the goal of the current description is to make explicit the realisational options for phases in terms of mode that would allow such questions to be answered.
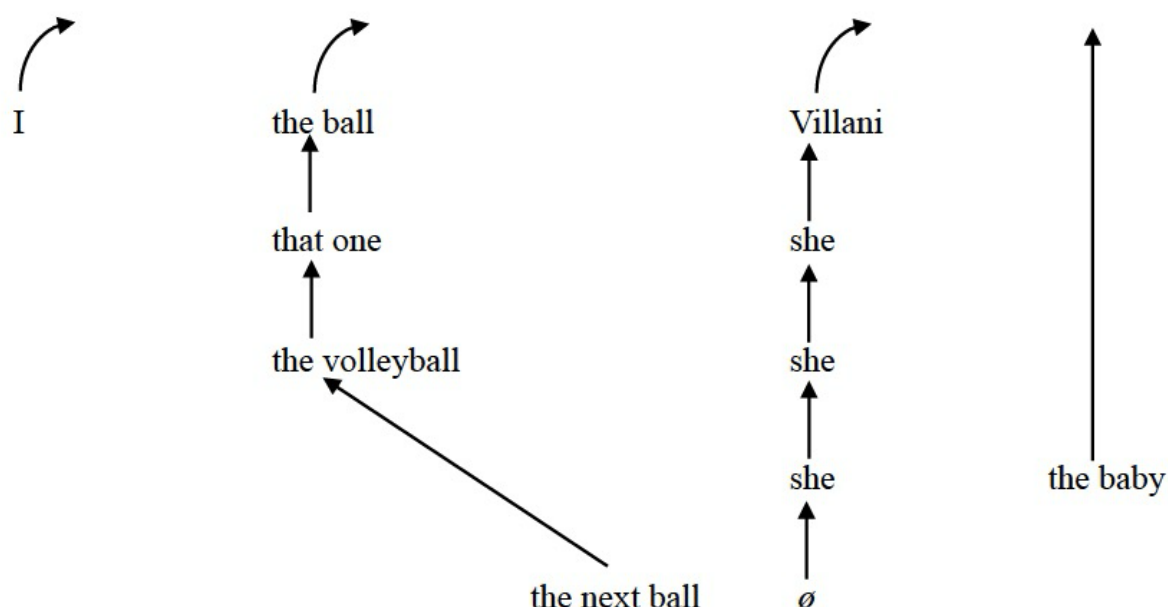
Figure 4. Participant chain within the play phase. The beginning and end of each chain demarcates a new chunk while the continuation of a chain helps maintain the chunk.

The demarcation patterns thus bound the different stages and phases relatively cleanly. However if we look more closely at the thematic and connexion patterns, we see that there is a bit more chunking than this. In particular, the coach draws upon the internal connexion *so* as a textual Theme three times: once within the Aim stage, once to begin the Specifications stage, and once more within the logistics phase. Being internal connexion and a textual Theme, these do demarcation in a similar manner to the *alrights* discussed above. However their scopee is smaller than the *alrights*, which means they demarcate smaller chunks. We can illustrate this by looking at the layers of connexion that occur in this text, as shown by the reticula in Figure 5. Here we have just included the internal connexions in the Aim and the *play* phase of the Specifications.

| Staging + Phasing | Connexion | Speaker | textual + interpersonal Theme | unmarked Theme | Rheme |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Aim** | | Coach: | *whistle* | | |
| | | | <u>Alright</u> | Are we | happy to keep these teams? |
| | | Player: | | | Sure |
| | | Coach: | **So** | two on two | Compulsory three contacts |
| | | | | | No jumping |
| | | | *But* | you | have uh baby balls |
| **Specifications** *play* | | | So if | I | 'm playing the ball over at Villani |
| | | | | she | 's got to pass that one |
| | | | | she | 'd volleyball the volleyball |
| | | | *but* | she | has to pass the baby |
| | | | before | | playing the next ball |
| | | | | | Make sense? |
| | | Player: | | | Yep |
| | | Coach: | <u>Alright</u> | we | 've done different variations of it |

Figure 5. Connexion relations in the Aim stage and *play* phase.

This analysis shows that the first *alright* marks the beginning of the whole Set Up and demarcates it as a chunk in its own right, distinct from what occurs before and after. The second *alright* helps to chunk the explanation of how the drill will work in the Aim and the play phase from the logistics that follow it. By contrast, each *so* and *but* then work to demarcate smaller chunks within the chunks marked by *alrights*. The first *so* distinguishes:

//1^ <u>Al*/right</u> //4 ^ Are we /happy to /keep/ ^ / these */teams//

//1 **\*Sure**//

from:

//1\*So //3 two on \*/two
//3 ^Com/pulsory /three \*/contacts
//^ ^//
//3 No \*/jumping
**//1 But you /have /uh /baby /^ \*/balls**//

The second *so* distinguishes this chunk from:

//3 ^ So if /I'm playing the /ball over at Vi\*/llani
//3 ^ she's got to /pass \*/that /one
//3 ^ she'd /volleyball the \*/volleyball
//3 ^ but she /has to \*/pass
**//1 ^ the /baby be/fore /playing the /next \*/ball**

Here we have included the intonation to show that the final lines of each chunk also draw on tone 1 to support the completion, whereas within the chunks there tends to be a sequence of tone 3s. The *but*s in these two examples also play a role in linking the final clause or clause complex to the rest of the chunk.

What this suggests is that there can be bigger and smaller demarcations breaking up the text into different sized informational chunks. Smaller chunks can occur within larger chunks, allowing for any given stretch of language to begin a new informational wave while also continuing the flow of a larger wave. We will call this a *hierarchy of demarcation*. Such a hierarchy is illustrated in Figure 6, where the excerpt above is replayed with boxes to indicate where smaller chunks are nested into larger ones. For example the stretch from the first *so* to the end of *baby balls* is one chunk and the stretch from the second *so* to *playing the next ball* is another chunk. But these two chunks work together with the stretch from the first *Alright* to *Sure*, as a single larger informational chunk in the text.

| Coach: | //1^ <u>Al</u>*/right | //4 ^ Are we | /happy to /keep/ ^ / these */teams// |
|---|---|---|---|
| Player: | | | //1 *Sure// |
| Coach: | //1*So | //3 two on */two<br>//^ ^// | //3 ^Com/pulsory /three */contacts<br><br>//3 No */jumping |
| | **//1 But** | **you** | **/have /uh /baby /^ */balls** |
| | //3 ^ So if | /I | 'm playing the /ball over at Vi*/llani |
| | | //3 ^ she | 's got to /pass */that /one |
| | | //3 ^ she | 'd /volleyball the */volleyball |
| | //3 ^ but | she | /has to */pass //1 ^ **the /baby** |
| | **be/fore** | | **/playing the /next */ball** |
| | //^ 3 <u>Al</u>*/right | we | 've //1 **done /different vari*/ations of it** |

Figure 6. Hierarchy of Demarcation in the Aim and play phase.

Recognising a hierarchy of demarcation allows us to describe the information flow of the rest of the Set up. Through this stretch, there is a sequence of relatively small chunks of information with each focusing on a different aspect of the drill's logistics, illustrated in Figure 7. This figure shows that the coach chunks up the logistics phase initially into three batches of information, each being finalised through a falling tone 1. The first specifies how the drill will begin:

> //3 *I'll */start* //3 ^ *the*/rally //1 ^ **with an/easy ball */in**

The second specifies how teams will come in and out of the drill:

> //3 ^ *Which/ever team/loses goes */off the* //1 **third team comes /on on their */side**

And the third directs the teams to keep their own score:

> //1 **Keep your /own */score//**

Following an interruption where the coach calls a player, *Suz*, to throw him the ball, the coach then elaborates further, marking two chunks with *so* and ending with tone 1:

> //1*So //3 *third */team//* 2 ^ /wait at the */side cos you could //1 **come on /either */way**

> //1^ So /**what's gonna /be im/portant in */this//**

The coach then closes out the Set Up and begins the Action of the drill itself by hitting the ball over the net. That is, the throwing of the ball over the net functions to bring together all of the Set Up as one informational chunk and demarcate it from the Action.

| Coach: | //^// | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | //3 *I* | | ʼll */start*//3 ^ the*/rally*//1 ^ **with an/easy ball */in** |
| | //3 ^ *Which/ever team/loses* | goes */off | |
| | the //1 **third team** | comes /on on their */side | |
| | //^// | | |
| | //1 **Keep** | your /own */score// | |
| | | //3 *Suz*// [calling a name] | |
| | | //^^^ | |
| //1*So //3 *third */team* | // 2 ^ /wait | at the */side | |
| cos | you | could //1 **come on /either */way** | |
| | //^^^^ | | |
| // 1^ So | /what | ʼs gonna /be im/portant in */this// | |
| *Hits ball over the net to start play* | | | |

Figure 7. Hierarchy of Demarcation in the logistics phase.

Figure 8 brings everything together for this text, including some chunks not illustrated above, to show that the hierarchy of demarcation: 1) helps realise the staging and phasing of the text; and 2) sets up smaller informational waves within the stages and phases.

| Staging + Phasing | Speaker |  |
|---|---|---|
| **Aim** | Coach: | *whistle* |
|  |  | //1^ Al*/right //4 ^ Are we /happy to /keep/ ^ / these */teams// |
|  | Player: | //1 *Sure// |
|  | Coach: | //1*So //3 two on */two //3 ^Com/pulsory /three */contacts //^ ^// //3 No */jumping |
|  |  | //1 But you /have /uh /baby /^ */balls |
| **Specifications** *play* |  | //3 ^ So if /I'm playing the /ball over at Vi*/llani //3 ^ she's got to /pass */that /one //3 ^ she'd /volleyball the */volleyball //3 ^ but she /has to */pass |
|  |  | //1 ^ the /baby be/fore /playing the /next */ball //^// |
|  |  | //2 Make */sense |
|  | Player: | //1Yep// |
|  | Coach: | //^ 3 Al*/right we've //1 done /different vari*/ations of it //^// |
| *logistics* |  | //3 I'll */start//3 ^ the*/rally//1 ^ with an/easy ball */in //3 ^ Which/ever team/loses goes */off, the //1 third team comes /on on their */side //^// |
|  |  | //1 Keep your /own */score// |
|  |  | //3 *Suz// [calling a name] //^^^ |
|  |  | //1*So //3 third */team// 2 ^ /wait at the */side cos you could //1 come on /either */way //^^^^ |
|  |  | // 1^ So /what's gonna /be im/portant in */this// |
|  |  | *Hits ball over the net to start play* |

Figure 8. Hierarchy of Demarcation in the whole Set Up

As Figure 8 illustrates, the demarcation used by the coach lines up relatively cleanly with the boundaries of the stages and phases of the genre. The beginning of the Aim stage is realised by the start of a new chunk marked by the connexion *alright*. The end of the stage is also realised by the end of a chunk, marked by the falling tone on *But you have uh baby balls*, which works with the following *so* to additionally being the Specification stage. That is, resources in mode divide the basic overview of the game in the Aim stage:

> *So, two on two, compulsory three contact, no jumping but you have uh baby balls*

from the unpacking of what this will look like in the Specifications stage:

> *So if I'm playing the ball over at Villani, she's got to pass that one, she'd volleyball the volleyball, but she has to pass the baby before playing the next ball.*

At the same time, these two stretches are brought together within a larger chunk of information. This acknowledges the fact that the two chunks work together: the beginning of the Specifications is an unpacking of the general description of the game in the Aims.

Within the logistics phase the chunking is more specific. It again divides the text into general logistics involving three components:

> *I'll start the rally with an easy ball in.*
> *Whichever team loses goes off, the third teams comes on, on their side.*
> *Keep your own score.*

and an unpacking of the second component associated with how the third team comes on:

> *So third team wait at the side cos you could come on either way.*

But it also breaks up each component into its own chunk:

| |
|---|
| *I'll start the rally with an easy ball in.* |
| *Whichever team loses goes off, the third teams comes on, on their side.* |
| *Keep your own score.* |

This is because each of these components is independent of the other and so does not necessarily need to be 'read' together. Put another way, there is no reason in terms of field or tenor that each needs to be grouped with the other in order for it to be understood – the start of the rally involves distinct activities to the change in teams and to the scoring. The coach thus flags these as three distinct components of the logistics by distinguishing them as distinct informational chunks.

Figure 8 shows that throughout the Set Up, there is quite significant layering of chunks to organise the information flow of the text. But it also indicates that the whole Set Up is realised by one big chunk which distinguishes it from the following stages in the drill and the whole drill itself from the previous drill. These demarcations are realised not through language but rather through a whistle at the beginning of the Set Up and the coach hitting the ball over the net at the end. Although we cannot explore this here, this illustrates that the higher-level

organisation of language-in-action texts often occurs through physical actions themselves such as hitting the ball over and through non-linguistic sound such as a whistle (Hood forthcoming).[5]

## 6. Mode as a resource for meaning

Viewing coach talk through the lens of demarcation allows us to see larger and smaller packages of information that help to make the text flow and remain coherent. It illustrates how things can be both brought together *and* separated in a text, such that the same meanings can be seen as both 'standing alone' and being part of a larger whole. As we have seen, many of these chunks align with genre staging and phasing and although not explored in detail here, chunks also often align with patterns in field and tenor. For example, when the coach is exemplifying how the drill will be played in:

> *So if I'm playing the ball over at Villani, she's got to pass that one – she'd volleyball the volleyball – but she has to pass the baby before playing the next ball.*

he establishes a series of activity that unfolds through time (Doran & Martin 2021). This can be illustrated by rearranging the activities in the temporal order that they will occur ('field time'), with ^ indicating sequence and = indicating simultaneity:

> *I'm playing the ball over at Villani*
>
> ^
>
> *she has to pass the baby*
>
> ^
>
> *she'll play the next ball = she's got to pass that one = she'd volleyball the volleyball*

---

[5] When it comes to dealing with physical action, non-linguistic sound and paralanguage, there is often a question of 'how much' to bring into the semiotic description; this is a particularly pertinent question in highly language-in-action texts such as those in sporting contexts. Ngo et al. (2022) for example, focusing on paralanguage, solve the problem by suggesting that semiotic body-language can be distinguished analytically from somatic body-language (i.e. non-semiotic physical action), by the degree to which it is convergent with the prosodic phonology of language. Paralanguage, they argue, moves with the rhythm of language, whereas somatic body-language does not. While both the whistle and the hitting of the ball over the net could arguably be considered part of the rhythmic pattern of the language between them, in that they could be read as occurring on beats before and after the language, a perhaps more generalisable argument for including them within the semiotic text could simply be that they realise semiotic choices – in this case the mode-choices of demarcation, whether or not that occurs with the rhythm of language. In the case of the whistle, this is further emphasised by the systemic choices that can occur. There are three main whistles in the data we looked at across indoor volleyball, beach volleyball and Australian rules football, distinguished by their pitch contours and length. This one is a long whistle, with a fall-rise pattern that is louder at the beginning and the end. This tends to be used to end a relatively long stretch of action such as the previous drill here. By contrast, there are single short-sharp and flat bursts of the whistle, which tend to start or pause smaller stretches of action such as telling players when to serve the next ball or when a point is over. And there are whistles with two or more short-flat bursts that tend to mean stop and give attention, often at an unexpected point (e.g. when the coach realises they need to further clarify something within a drill because the players are not doing what was expected). This latter whistle is particularly used when the need to stop is more urgent, such as when a ball is rolling across a court while someone is jumping (a very dangerous situation in volleyball), with the urgency marked by an increase in the number and loudness of the bursts.

This series of activity is placed in one chunk in order to emphasise its coherence as a single sequence outlining what the players need to do. The second step of passing the 'baby' however, is an unusual one in comparison to normal volleyball, as it involves throwing a second ball where there would normally only be one ball in play. So the coach sets this up as a counterexpectant activity within the series, marked by *but*. In terms of mode, the coach marks this by using lower-level demarcation to distinguish the counterexpectant activities from those that are expected.

| |
|---|
| *I'm playing the ball over at Villani,*<br><br>^<br><br>*she's got to pass that one = she'd volleyball the volleyball* |
| *but*<br>*she has to pass the baby*<br><br>^<br><br> *before playing the next ball* |

The coach thus draws on the resource of demarcation to group together the whole series of activity as one, while at the same time distinguishing the expectant activities from the counter-expectant activities. That is, demarcation is used to help chunk up significant meanings in field.

Similarly in terms of tenor, the coach regularly demarcates chunks where he is giving instructions from those where he is looking for a response from the players (i.e. between proposals and propositions: Halliday & Matthiessen 2014; Doran, Martin & Zappavigna 2025):

| Coach:<br>Players: | *Alright are we happy to keep these teams?*<br>*Sure.* |
|---|---|
| Coach | *So, two on two, compulsory three contacts, no jumping.*<br>*So if I'm playing the ball over at Villani, she's got to pass that one – she'd volleyball the volleyball – but she has to pass the baby before playing the next ball.* |
| | *Make sense?* |
| Player: | *Yep.* |

Thus in addition to linking 'upwards' with genre staging and phasing, mode works 'around' with patterns of field and tenor to help organise the different meanings that they put forward. In addition, if we look 'below' in terms of discourse semantics and lower strata, we see that the patterns of demarcations are largely realised by textual systems (with some logical systems). In discourse semantics, it is realised by PARTICIPANT IDENTIFICATION, PERIODICITY and INTERNAL CONNEXION (where internal connexion is somewhat blurry between the logical and textual metafunction); in lexicogrammar, by patterns of THEME and INFORMATION DISTRIBUTION; and within phonology, by patterns of TONE (interpreted in terms of logical meanings) and TONALITY (the distribution of tone groups).[6] All of this together underpins why

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[6] Although we have not explicitly discussed TONALITY – the breaking up of spoken text into tone groups – and INFORMATION DISTRIBUTION – tone groups' relation with the grammatical clause – here, they play a significant

we consider demarcation to be part of mode within SFL: it helps realise genre staging (looking above), it co-patterns with field and tenor (looking around), and it is realised by discourse semantics and other strata (looking below), primarily through textual systems.

This interpretation of mode as a resource for organising information connects with similar recent developments in field and tenor where these have been reconsidered as resources construing phenomena and resources for enacting sociality (Doran & Martin 2021; Doran, Martin & Herrington 2024; Doran, Martin & Zappavigna 2025). Viewing coach talk from the perspective of mode allows us to understand how the wealth of different ways of meaning that the coach has at their disposal – both linguistic and bodily – are brought together to make a coherent text. And from the players' side, it gives us an insight into how they can follow the multitude of instructions given, such that they can then do the action. It thus gives us an insight into both the language and the action of highly *language-in-action* texts.

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role and have underpinned much of the phonological reasoning in this chapter. For example, the fact that each of //3 *two on* */two* //3 *^Com/pulsory /three */contacts /^ ^* //3 *No */jumping//* is said on three different tone groups indicates that these can be read as three distinct chunks at a relatively small level. Indeed this is inherent in Halliday's description of the function of tonality as distributing the text into quanta of information (Halliday & Greaves 2008: 60). This interpretation can be extended further down into the rhythmic boundaries of the foot, the syllable and the phoneme in terms of the periodic patterns they draw upon for segmentation as illustrated by Cléirigh (1998) from whom we drew the term 'demarcation'. Catford's (1977: 226-229) exemplification of this type of segmentation based on periodic phonetic patterns is particularly illustrative in this regard (as discussed by Matthiessen 2023: 124).

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