Pre-publication draft in AS Ross, D Caldwell, YJ Doran (eds) *Language in Sport: Real-time talk in Training and Games*.

Language in sport: Wherefore and where to?

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We opened this book with a dedication to John Walsh, a colleague and friend who, deeply sadly, is no longer with us. We dedicated the book to him because of his pioneering work in building the field of sports linguistics in recent years, having brought together scholars in an edited book on the subject (Caldwell, Walsh, Vine & Jureidini, 2017a), authored chapters within that book (Walsh & Jureidini, 2017; Walsh & Caldwell, 2017; Caldwell, Walsh, Vine & Jureidini, 2017b), and most recently, published posthumously what is likely to become a seminal book in the field on evaluative language in sport (Walsh, Caldwell & Jureidini, 2024). In the nascent but burgeoning field of sports linguistics, these publications and the collective effort of bringing people together to produce them has been vital. But we mention John here in our concluding chapter not just to honour him, but also because when thinking about the place of sports linguistics as a research field, Walsh's career offers a useful perspective to understand how it fits, where it comes from, and where it could go.

Walsh and his co-authors open their 2024 book by asking why write a book on sports discourse. After acknowledging that there can be no single answer to this question, they state that, nonetheless:

> We are fans. We play, watch and argue about sport. As linguists and social scientist, we want to better understand our relationship to sport, and in particular the ways in which we communicate in, through and about sport (Walsh et al., 2024, p. 1).

This pithy response, while not one that would typically be given in, say, a grant application or as a justification for research in a journal article, is perhaps much more honest about why one studies sport or other forms of culture (e.g. music, art, theatre etc.) than other academic discussions would typically allow. The editors of the current volume are definitely in this boat as sports fans who play (used to play), watch and argue about sport, and if you are reading this it is likely you are the same. But this quotidian sense of 'enjoying' sport in our everyday life as a reason for studying it perhaps downplays sport's significance and suggests it as a purely personal activity. But sport, like all cultural activities, functions within the broader social world, contributes to the social patterns

that organise our lives and allow us to build community. This has been recognised outside of linguistics for some time – Bourdieu, for example, in his classic study of the social basis of taste (1984) noted that:

> The system of the sporting activities and entertainments that offer themselves at a given moment for the potential 'consumers' to choose from is predisposed to express all the differences sociologically pertinent at that moment: oppositions between the sexes, between the classes and between class fractions. The agents only have to follow the leanings of their habitus in order to take over, unwittingly, the intention immanent in the corresponding practices, to find an activity which is entirely 'them' and, with it, kindred spirits. (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 223)

Sport is a major part of society, and so like almost everything in society, how people engage with it varies across society and is meaningful in ways that help people build community, identity and an understanding of their social world. In this sense, sport is given meaning in society. Indeed Walsh et al. (2024) write about sport because it is meaningful to them, and this meaning is deeply *enjoyable* (at least when not on the losing end of a match).

CLR James – the famed anti-colonial theorist, historian, activist and cricket writer put this most explicitly in the introduction to his collected writings on cricket:

> An artistic, a social event does not reflect the age. It is the age. Cricket, I want to say most clearly, is not an addition or a decoration or some specific unit that one adds to what really constitutes the history of a period. Cricket is as much part of the history as books written are part of the history... Far more people play cricket, look at cricket and scan the cricket news in the morning paper, far more take part in these activities than those who read books (James, 1985, p. xi)

James' goal in his cricket writing was to eliminate the boundaries that syphon off cricket as a 'game' distinct from the rest of society; for to know society is to know cricket, and vice versa, as summed up in the title of his 1963 cricketing memoir *Beyond a Boundary* and the question James sets for himself in that book *What do they know about cricket who only cricket know?*. Such a view does not, of course, just apply to cricket, but to sport in general. If we seriously wish to understand the social world, sport is one of the things that we must come to grips with.

Walsh's linguistics was one with a social bent, following Halliday's concern for language as a 'social semiotic'. As Halliday (1975, pp. 169-170) explains:

> Truly speaking man does not talk; **men** talk. People talk to each other; and it is this aspect of man's humanity, largely neglected in the dominant linguistics of the 1960s, that has emerged to claim attention once more.
>
> Linguistics is a necessary part of the study of people in their environment; and their environment consists, first and foremost, of other people. Man's ecology is primarily a social ecology, one which defines him as 'social man'; and we cannot understand about social man if we do not understand about language... [for] a general framework expressing the social meaning of language... the terminal direction will be towards integration – towards eliminating boundaries rather than imposing them, and towards a unifying conception of language as a form of social semiotic.

Walsh's interest in sport, then, was not just as a fan; one who enjoyed sport and enjoyed talking about sport. It was also as one concerned with sport's role in understanding language as a social semiotic (language's role, in its guise as a social semiotic, in building sport). This is in many ways one of the things that has driven many of the chapters in this volume, focusing as they do on how different aspects of language build different social situations.

In terms of Walsh's career, although he was a fan of sport, this was of course not his only interest in this regard. He was a linguist who worked in a Linguistics department and was as such interested in language itself. Whether or not one *enjoys* sport, as linguists who are interested in how language varies in relation to its context, we argue that sport has a fundamental role in our understanding of language itself. Sports language is a register unto itself – and as such differs from other registers – but it holds within it immense registerial variation.

The overarching picture that the chapters in this book build is of variation in the language of *doing* sport. This includes variation in the different components of language that constitute sports language – from lexical profiles to emotional and evaluative language, and abstract resources organising information to nuanced dialogic patterns; but also variation in the situations that constitute 'doing sport' - most obviously between coaching and playing, but within this between during play, during stoppages, in trainings, and on tv; all of these draw on different patterns of language to build their meanings, differences that we are only just coming to grips with. Like academic discourse in educational linguistics, the language of sport is not homogenous.

To get at this variation we can perhaps look to other fields that have been struck by similar problems. We could, for example, take a leaf out of educational linguistics' concern for disciplinarity. The principle here is that writing in History is not the same as writing in Science nor of any other subject, as subjects work to build different knowledges and maintain different social practices. Similarly, the language of football is likely to be different to the language of rowing or of volleyball or of other sports, as the way the sports work differ in ways that likely affect their communication. In this case, they vary in terms of the size of the playing team (football 11 on the field, ~20 in a matchday squad; volleyball 6 on a court, up to 12 in a squad; rowing 1-8 in a boat with no substitutions). They vary in their movement, with rowing involving relatively few yet precise and repetitive movements, and volleyball and football involving a wider variation of more reactive movements. They vary in how coaches can communicate with players in games or races: either directly with players throughout (volleyball), indirectly through breaks between play or over long distances (football), or not all (rowing); and they vary in how one 'wins', through a race where the eternal goal is to take a shorter time over the same distance (rowing), through points where hundreds are scored and so the concern is for the aggregate rather than any individual point (volleyball) or through to goals where the low scoring is such that all goals are highly significant. These variables, and more, presumably affect how language is used by coaches and players. But the degree to which this is the case, and how this might occur, we do not yet know.

Similarly, we may consider the different social relationships that occur. This is more than just considering whether there is a coach-player discussion or a player-player discussion (or in the case of File's chapter in this book, an engineer-driver relation); or whether there is a one-to-one discussion or a one-to-many. When discussing the language of sport, we should be asking 'who is involved'? Are we looking at elite sport? Or casual sport? Are we considering junior participants or adults? Are they doing this for fun, or they on a pathway toward professionalism? Are they learning the game or are they very experienced? Are they a leader in the team – a senior player, captain, head coach? Or are they 'just' a regular player or assistant coach? Does their position on the field require them to speak more or less or differently? To give instructions or to take

instructions? All of these are very likely to affect how language is used, as these relationships are established and negotiated through language.

Or perhaps, in line with our discussion in the introductory chapter, we can look at how close we are to the action – as the subtitle of Walsh et al.'s (2024) book suggests: *Crowds, Coaches and Commentators*. Are we talking about sport in a delayed manner – written articles in the media, post-match discussions etc.; are we in the moment of action, but reacting rather than participating such as a commentator or a crowd (and if so, are we a radio commentator that has to fill in all the details, or a tv one that can let the images do much of the job; are we at home watching the tv, at the pub cheering with a number of others; or at the game with a seething mass); or are we actually doing sport – the focus of this book – playing, training or coaching. In our own work (e.g., Doran et al., 2021), we have emphasised that this is a variable that greatly affects how language is used. Even in the space of doing sport, there are immense differences between, say, the language used in the heat of the moment as a player is about to be tackled, and the language used when giving feedback to players, such that the use of language from one situation would be deeply incoherent in the other. At the most extreme ends of the action, grammatical and phonological patterns that are typical of language in other situations start to break down, and hand over their meanings to other resources such as voice quality, loudness, and intensity. This happens because language in such situations is under immense time pressure and is in fact ancillary to the action that is occurring, working to support the action rather than be the primary driver of the situation. Highly intense sporting contexts thus offer opportunities to view the boundaries of language – what language looks like when the structures and options typically available to people disappear.

More broadly, however, what this points to is that when we discuss the language of sport we are generalising. One task for sports linguistics is to come to grips with this variation and develop tools for understanding it. This book has begun to consolidate work in one area of the field in this regard – the language of doing sport – so as to complement work looking at other areas that have tend to focus on reactions to sport (see our introductory chapter).

Though given physical nature of sport, there is one area in which sports linguistics is potentially in a unique position to contribute to linguistics and semiotics more broadly. This is precisely at the intersection of 'language' and 'action'. It is now a standard principle of social linguistics that language does not occur in isolation – it is multimodal, encompassing a wide range of meaning making systems. Any approach aiming to understand the social nature of language must be able to account for broader multimodality; or put another way, it must be able to situate linguistics within the broader field of semiotics.

One aspect of multimodality with decades of research is how language intersects with gesture and body language (which is of course related to, though distinct from how sign languages build their meaning). A major question for the field, however, is how to draw the boundary between meaningful gesture and 'non-meaningful' physical actions or behaviour (what Martin & Zappavigna, 2019 call 'somasis'). There have been many proposals in this regard. Coming from the framework of SFL, for example, Martin and Zappavigna (2019; building upon work by Cleirigh, 2011) suggest that one way of distinguishing semiotic body language from somatic body language is that semiotic body language tends to occur in tune with the rhythmic and intonational phonology of language. This is a useful insight, but for sporting contexts it suggests that the physical actions of sport are entirely somatic (non-semiotic), because they are not in tune with language.

The physical actions of sport are clearly qualitatively different to the gestures that occur with language. But as any player or fan with experience of a match knows, one can 'read' what is

happening in a game; players actions are meaningful in the sense that they involves choices from a range of possibilities (will the player pass, side-step or barge through a tackle?), they set up expectancies as to what might come (if they have been tackled, was it one where we expect a foul?), and perhaps most importantly, they provoke meaningful responses; both from crowds and viewers who 'ohh' and 'ahh' and gasp and scream and celebrate; and from other players who change their actions.[1] The actions of the players are meaningful. But how we can get at this meaning – how we can understand somasis as semiosis – is not at all clear. Sport offers a unique possibility for understanding this. And indeed, Lambrinos' chapter on ballet in this book offers a pathway, focused as it is on the explicit clustering and interpretation of actions as meaningful 'behaviours', and the further clustering and interpretation of these as dispositions. But this is just one pathway, as outside of a pedagogic context, much of the physical action is interpreted implicitly.

So why sports linguistics? Because aside from enjoying sport and enjoying studying sport, it offers avenues for understanding society, language and semiosis.

But to return to Walsh's career. He not only was a sports lover and a linguist (among many other things), he was deeply interested in and involved in work focusing on literacy and education. This perhaps gives us a final component to the 'why' of sports linguistics. Literacy programs necessarily need an understanding of language; despite significant debate and discussion for many years in the field, this is now a standard assumption. There is not yet a field relating to sport where such an assumption occurs; but as many of the chapters in this book show, those engaging in sports linguistics do not just do so for the love and interest of sport and language, but to be able to contribute back to sport itself. This may be as an extension to educational linguistic efforts in relation to coaching pedagogy; it may be in relation to supporting sports psychology and the social development of players; or it may be in relation to supporting high performance in sport itself. As a field, we are only just beginning to contribute to these areas; but give it time, effort and discussion, and sports linguistics can move toward having a significant role in supporting sport and the people involved in it, whatever that may be.

So, to John. Thank you for getting many of us going; your work has helped establish the field of sports linguistics, and we hope we're able to keep your spirit going, pushing forward in understanding language and sport and what we can do with it. And to those of you reading, we welcome you to join us – there is much to do, and the horizon is exciting.

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[1] We can see the sociological significance of this in the following quote from Wacquant who, while explaining Bourdieu's field theory, uses a sportsperson's recognition of another player's actions as a metaphor for the place of a social agent in the world: 'The relation between the social agent and the world is not that between a subject... and an object, but a relation of "ontological complicity"... between habitus, as the socially constituted principle of perspective and appreciation, and the world which determines it. "Practical sense"... constitutes the world as meaningful by spontaneously anticipating its immanent tendencies in the manner of the ball player endowed with great "field vision" who, caught in the heat of the action, instantaneously intuits the moves of his opposition and teammates, acts and reacts in an "inspired" manner without the benefit of hindsight and calculative reason." (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1993, p. 21)

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