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Using Systemic Functional Linguistics to Explore the Language of Sport[1]

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Language and sport are deeply intertwined. When playing sport, we shout and scream and welp and swear far more than in other realms of life; we praise and berate, we comfort and commiserate, and we direct and encourage our fellow players. When watching sport, we react and respond, we ooh and we ahh, and we comment on everyone and everything in our eyeline. When talking or writing about sport, we bond with others in happiness and despair and we interpret small instances of gameplay through social values underpinning our life. Sport is a major part of life, and our engagement with it is largely through language.

The contexts of sport vary substantially; and in turn the language of sport varies substantially. To understand how language and sport work to build their meanings, we need an approach for understanding sports language in all its manifestations, viewed from multiple angles and in multiple contexts. One such approach for understanding language is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014).

SFL considers language and other semiotic modes as resources for meaning to be adapted in different ways for different contexts. SFL has long pointed to sports language as being crucial for understanding language in general. In particular, the language of playing sport has often been positioned as the archetypal 'context-dependent' language (Halliday 1979; Martin 1984). This chapter focuses on illustrating how SFL can be used to understand the widely-varying language of sport. Its goal is to show that SFL houses a very large suite of analytical tools for understanding variation in sports language, from larger-scale understandings of the genres and registers of sport (Martin & Rose 2008) to the specific discourse semantic (Martin & Rose 2007), lexicogrammatical (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014), and phonological resources (Halliday & Greaves 2008) that are taken up in different sporting contexts. It will also illustrate that these analytical tools in SFL are flexible enough to be modified and adapted for understanding situations where language itself is pushed and squeezed, especially in highly context-dependent language use such as in the intensity of play itself (for overviews of SFL see the handbooks by Bartlett & O'Grady 2017, and Thompson et al. 2019).

To do this, this chapter examines three illustrative examples of *text*, understood here in the SFL sense as meaningful instances of language in use, drawn from different sporting contexts. Each text will be used to illustrate a set of SFL tools that can help us understand the meanings being made. The first text is a written description of cricketer, used to illustrate SFL's notions of genre – broadly, the type of text and its social purpose – and register – how language varies with different situations – as well as the range of language features drawn upon to realise different genres. The second text is a television commentary of rugby league, to illustrate in particular how SFL's analyses of phonology can bring out meaning in text. The final text is of a coach and players during the actual playing of sport , to illustrate the flexibility of SFL as a model,

[1] I thank the editors of this volume for their very useful comments and suggestions during the writing of this chapter.

and how it can be used to interpret meanings where language is used in real time and closely integrated with physical activity.

To characterise these three texts, we will use an analytical lens in SFL called the mode continuum (Martin 1984). The mode continuum conceptualises how 'context-dependent' language is in any given situation, as a cline from language-as-reflection (less context-dependent) to language-in-action (more context-dependent). For example, a book on football history builds its meanings entirely through language, without relying on any immediate physical situation or shared context with the reader. This is called 'language as reflection', and is relatively context-independent. By contrast, when playing sport, language is typically supporting, coordinating and depending on the action, rather than being the primary focus. This is called 'language in action', constituting more context-dependent text, relying on one 'being there' for its meaning. A situation being more language-as-reflection or language-in-action significantly affects how language is used.

The mode continuum, as the name suggests, is a continuum rather than a binary, with texts being more toward the language–as–reflection pole or the language–in–action pole. In introducing the mode continuum Martin (1984) in fact uses sporting texts as examples, as illustrated by Figure 1.

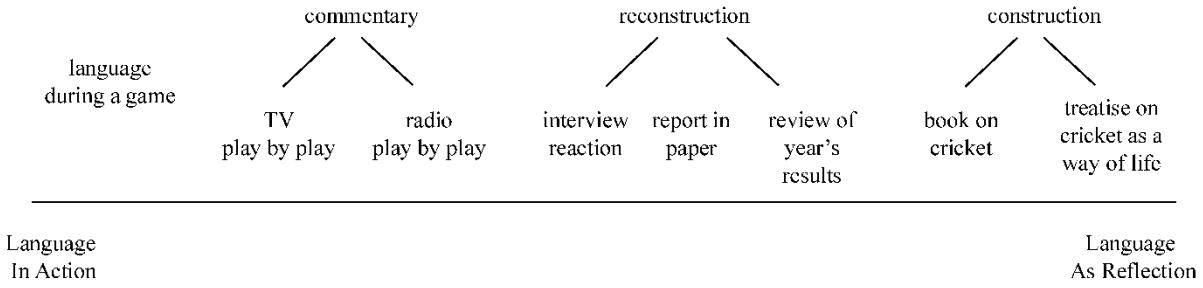

Figure 1. Sporting language and the mode continuum. Adapted from Martin (1984: 27)

Martin (1984: 27) illustrates the mode continuum by arranging different types of cricket-related texts along a scale of context-dependency. At the most context-dependent end (the language-in-action end) is talk exchanged by players during a match, which is embedded in the immediate physical and temporal situation. Slightly less embedded is live commentary, particularly on radio, where the speaker interprets the unfolding game for listeners who cannot see it. Television commentary is more detached, as both commentator and audience share the visual field. Further along the continuum are interviews conducted after the match, followed by next-day newspaper reports, which reconstruct rather than accompany the action. Beyond this are retrospective texts like annual reviews or general books on cricket, and at the most abstract end, philosophical discussions that use cricket symbolically – for example, as a reflection of national identity or ethical values. The progression reveals a shift not only in temporal distance from the event but also in the degree of abstraction, with language becoming increasingly removed from the immediate situation it represents.

In recent years, SFL work on sports language has expanded across the mode continuum. At the language-in-action pole, work on the language used by players and coaches during games and

training has focused on the evaluative language of coaches occurs during play (Caldwell 2025, Walsh & Jureidini 2017), during breaks in play (Caldwell 2025) and in team meetings (Walsh et al. 2024); as well as on the grammatical and phonological shifts as coaches and players move into more intense passages of play (Doran, Caldwell and Ross 2021). For commentary, Walsh, Caldwell & Jureidini (2024) again explore commentators' evaluative language, while Bowcher (2003) considers commentators' speaker roles and Clarke (2017) considers variations between radio and television commentary.

Reconstructions of sport in the media, for example through sports reports or magazine articles, is perhaps where SFL has primarily focused. Extending SFL's extensive work on media discourse in general, explorations include post-match interviews (Caldwell 2009), sports newspaper and magazine reports (Ghadessy 1988; Dreyfus & Jones 2010), and multimodal articles (Bowcher 2007; Caple 2017). At the construction end, Doran (2024) explored CLR James' use of cricket for understanding anti-colonial struggle in the West Indies. It is with this reconstruction of sport that we will begin, to illustrate how SFL's notions of genre and register can help us understand the language patterns at play in sports texts.

Reconstructing sport

SFL genre analysis is a powerful tool for uncovering how language constructs meaning in sport – not just in describing actions but in shaping how they are understood and valued within broader cultural contexts. Sport is often treated as a domain of physical performance, yet its significance extends beyond the field, embedded in the ways it is written about, reflected upon, and mythologised. A key strength of SFL is its ability to account for the social purposes of texts, showing how different genres and registers organise language to produce particular kinds of meaning. We can see this through Text 1, an excerpt from the first newspaper article written by the anti-colonial historian, activist and cricket writer CLR James, which led to his employment with the Manchester Guardian. In this article, James describes seeing an ageing bowler, Sydney Barnes, playing lower grade cricket in English. As its opening lines describes, Syd Barnes is generally considered one of, if not the best bowler ever (his bowling average, set between 1901-1914, has yet to be beaten). But when James saw him in 1932 he was 59 years old. Nonetheless, he took 7 wickets for about 30 runs – an extraordinary result, that for most other cricketers would be their career highlight. To illustrate the utility of genre for understanding texts such as this, the text's stages and phases have been labelled on the left. We will discuss these below.

Context	Sydney Barnes is generally admitted to be the greatest bowler cricket has yet seen. I had a glimpse of him the other day in action. He is fifty-nine years of age (the date of his birth given in *Wisden's Almanack* is incorrect). Yet the man is still a fine bowler. It was an experience to watch him.
Description	
physique	To begin with, Barnes not only is fifty-nine, but looks it. Some cricketers at fifty-nine look and move like men in their thirties. Not so Barnes. You can almost hear the old bones creaking. He is tall and thin, well over six feet, with strong features. It is rather a remarkable face in its way, and would belong to a great lawyer or a statesman without incongruity. He holds his head well back, with the rather long chin lifted. He looks like a man who has seen as much of the world as he wants to see.

practice	I saw him first before the match began, bowling to one of his own side without wickets. He carried his arm over as straight as a post, spinning a leg-break in the orthodox way. Then he had a knock himself. But although the distance was only a dozen yards and the ball was being bowled at a very slow pace, Barnes put a glove on. He was not going to run the risk of those precious fingers being struck by the ball. When the preliminary practice stopped he walked in, by himself, with his head in the air, a man intent on his own affairs.
bowling	His own side, Rawtenstall, took the field to get Nelson out. League sides will sometimes treat the new ball with Saturday-afternoon carelessness; not so Rawtenstall. Ten of them played about with an old ball: Barnes held the new. He fixed his field, two slips close in and the old-fashioned point, close in. Mid-off was rather wide. When every man was placed to the nearest centimetre Barnes walked back and set the old machinery in motion. As he forced himself to the crease you could see every year of the fifty-nine; but the arm swung over gallantly, high and straight. The wicket was slow, but a ball whipped hot from the pitch in the first over, and second slip took a neat catch.
fielding	When the over was finished he walked a certain number of steps and took up his position in the slips. He stood as straight as his high right arm, with his hands behind his back. The bowler began his run – a long run – Barnes still immovable. Just as the ball was about to be delivered Barnes bent forward slightly with his hands ready in front of him. To go right down as a normal slip fieldsman goes was for him, obviously, a physical impossibility. But he looked alert, and I got the impression that whatever went into his hands would stay there. As the ball reached the wicket-keeper's hands or was played by the batsman, Barnes straightened himself and once again put his hands behind his back. That was his procedure in the field right through the afternoon. Now and then by way of variety he would move a leg an inch or two and point it on the toe for a second or two. Apart from that, he husbanded his strength.
Reaction	He took 7 wickets for about 30 runs, and it is impossible to imagine better bowling of its kind.

Text 1: An appreciation of the bowler Syd Barnes (James 1932)

Through an SFL lens, this text provides a valuable case study of how genre and register shape sports discourse. Beginning first with genre, in SFL genres are used to conceptualise the social purpose and overall structure of text. In this case, James' article functions as a descriptive response (Rothery 1996), a genre typically focused on artistic and literary appreciation rather than sports writing. This is evident in the way the text foregrounds aesthetic evaluation and richly detailed characterisation, describing Barnes' physical presence, mannerisms and bearing with the kind of evaluative language more often found in literary response writing. By using this genre, James does not simply recount Barnes' bowling performance; he elevates it, presenting sport as a culturally significant and aesthetically rich domain.

Genres in SFL are typically described as unfolding through distinct stages that have their own purposes and language features (Martin & Rose 2008). In this excerpt, James' descriptive response unfolds through three main stages, noted on the left of Text 1 above: A Context stage, giving the background and James' overall impression of Barnes; a Description proper that considers Barnes' physique, preparatory work, bowling and fielding; and a brief Reaction stage synthesising James' appreciation of Barnes.

James uses a descriptive response to appreciate Syd Barnes and position it in an aesthetic realm affects the language patterns that are used within the genre. To see this, we can look at the patterns of register – the situational variables organising the language choices in a particular situation – that realise this genre. The three broadest register variables are *field* – what is going on or is being spoken about; *tenor* – the social relationships at play; and *mode* – the role of language and other semiotic resources in a situation. Each variable comprises a range of more specific parameters for understanding language.

We have already seen one of these: the mode continuum from language-in-action to language-as-reflection. The mode continuum does not just describe the role of language in a situation, but also characterises language itself. For example, Text 1 orients more toward the language-as-reflection end of the mode continuum, where meaning is constructed entirely through language rather than anchored in a shared physical context. This is evident in the way the text is highly self-contained: it does not refer to any physical situation of the reader (i.e. it has no *exophoric* reference; Martin & Rose 2007); it flags what it will talk about at the beginning, and synthesises its evaluation at the end (it has stronger *periodicity*; Martin & Rose 2007); and it has what Halliday (1985) calls high lexical density: a large number of lexical items per clause (4 per clause) e.g. those underlined in: *He fixed his field, two slips close in and the old-fashioned point, close in*); and low grammatical intricacy: few clauses per sentence (1.6 clauses per sentence), both typical of written language compared to spoken language.

In terms of tenor – the social relationships underpinning the text – we can consider the social contact the text presumes between the writer and readers (Poynton 1990). This text is written for insiders to cricket – relatively close contact for public writing. This is shown through the text's relative *proliferation* (its ability to share a lot of meanings) and *contraction* (its relative implicitness when sharing these meanings). This is clearest in its use of cricket-specific technicality and colloquialisms: *bowler, wicket, leg-break, new ball, old ball, slips, wicket-keeper* etc., that are presumed to be understood (through *homophoric* reference; Martin & Rose 2007). The close contact is also shown through James' evaluations of Barnes (his *attitude*; Martin & White 2005), both the amount of evaluative language he used, as well as its implicitness. For example James' final sentence notes *He took 7 wickets for about 30 runs*. These are remarkable figures that afford enormous positive evaluation of Barnes, but James does not make any of this attitude explicit. For an outsider to cricket, this evaluation is lost.

In terms of field (*what* is being talked about) James varies the 'zoom' of his descriptions. For example, when stepping through Barnes' bowling and fielding (his *activities*), James regularly shifts from describing actions in general terms to breaking down that action into more specific moments (what Doran & Martin 2021 call 'momenting'). An example is James' description of Barnes practicing his bowling before the match. He first notes that Barnes bowled to his own side, before stepping through what that bowling entailed (activities in sequence are marked by ^; those that moment others are shown by || and indenting):

Bowling to one of his own side without wickets
||
He carried his arm over as straight as a post
^
Spinning a leg break in the orthodox way.

This is a regular pattern through James' text, allowing a depiction of both the overall events of the day and how those events occurred. This shift in perspective is parallelled in the descriptions of Barnes himself. James sets up a compositional perspective on Barnes, describing parts of his body at various degrees of specificity, from Barnes himself, to his hand, to the his fingers in his hand. For example::

- **Old bones** that creak
- With strong **features**
- Remarkable **face** …[that] would belong to a great lawyer or a statesman without incongruity
- **Head** well back
- Rather long **chin** lifted
- Carried his **arm** over as straight as a post
- Those precious **fingers**
- **Head** in the air

These descriptions come heavy with evaluation. By describing parts of Barnes body in addition to Barnes himself, James is parallelling how one describes an artwork, zooming between the whole piece and its specific components. This ideational zooming back and forth, coupled with the interpersonal shifts in evaluative language, brought together in a descriptive response genre is a major part of what makes this text's description so rich. For our purposes, this illustrates the utility of the SFL framework for understanding texts such as this. A genre perspective allows a link between the overall purposes and function of the text, with the range of register variables and multiple strands of meaning that occur in language. SFL allows a detailed perspective on all of these at once, as well as a view on how they work together to achieve the social purposes of sporting texts.

Commentating sport

Whereas CLR James' descriptive response reflects on sport as an aesthetic domain, sports commentary operates toward the other end of the mode continuum, where language is embedded in the unfolding action. Text 2 below provides an example of this shift, capturing 30 seconds of live television commentary by Australian rugby league commentator Ray Warren during the final play of the 2016 National Rugby League Grand Final. In this play, the Melbourne Storm, trailing the Cronulla Sharks 14-12, ran halfway up the field to get within range of scoring to win the game, but through desperate defending were tackled, and Cronulla won their first title in 50 years of trying.

In contrast to James' carefully structured written appreciation, Warren's live commentary is shaped by its real-time, spoken delivery, with his intonation and rhythm particularly crucial to the commentary's meaning. Rather than reconstructing past events with reflective distance, Warren's language works dynamically to build the drama of the moment, keeping pace with the unfolding action and enhancing the emotional intensity for viewers toward the final climax of the game being won.

Here our focus is on how Warren builds the drama of this play by using SFL's phonological analyses of intonation and rhythm. To get its feel, it would be useful to watch and listen to this excerpt while you read the text.[2].

The text below has been annotated for its intonation and rhythm following Halliday & Greaves (2008). Each tone group – the basic unit of intonation – is marked by double slashes // on its own line. Tone groups chunk texts into basic units of information, and so tone group boundary choices indicate how we hear the text as relevant pieces of information (its *tonality*). Each tone group includes a shift in tone, called the tone contour. The place where this tone contour begins (its *tonicity*), marked in bold, indicates the informational focus. The number beginning each tone group indicates the *tone* itself. There are three tones in this text: Tone 1 is a falling tone, typical of statements; Tone 3 is a flat or slightly rising tone, indicating continuity (e.g. for listing things); Tone 5 is a rising then falling tone, often indicating surprise, such as on *Wow!* or *No way!* (Halliday & Greaves 2008: 112). Key here are the repeated Tone 5s – an unusual choice – and the tone group boundaries.

Tone groups consist of one or more feet, which are the basis of rhythm and are marked by a single slash /. Important for us is the use of silent beats, marked by ^, that are regularly used at the beginning of tone groups.

//1 That's the /**third** /gone

// 3 ^ / ^ They're a/bout /**two** metres

// 1 ^ into /enemy /**te**rri/try.

//3 ^ It's /gone a/way /there for /**Cronk**.

//3 ^ To /give it /out /**wide**.

//5 Here's /Koroi/**be**/te.

//5 ^ He's /got them /turning a/**round**.

//5 ^ It's /now with /Vuni/**va**lu.

//5 ^ /Vuni/**va**lu.

//5 ^ The /season's /top /**try** /scorer.

//5 ^ /Got the /ball a/**way**.

//5 ^ /**Brom**wich to

//5 **Smith**.

//5 ^ /Smith to /**Hamp/**ton.

//5 ^ /Hampton /can he /find a /**gap** {Siren sounds}

[2] At the time of writing, it can be viewed from 13:01 to 13:41, here: https://www.nrl.com/watch/matches/telstra-premiership/2016/grand-final/extended-highlights-storm-v-sharks/

//5 ^ He /gets the /**ball** a/way.

//3 ^ It's /back / to /**Smith**.

//3 ^ Smith /gets it a/way to /**Cronk**.

//5 ^ /Cronk's /got /Koroi/**be**te / with him.

//5 ^ /Have they /got a /**chance** /here.

//5 ^ /Koroi/bete's /put /**down**.

//5 ^ The /siren /**sounds**.

//5 ^ Cro/nulla have /**won** it.

//5 ^ / ^ Cro/nulla have /**won** it.

//5 ^ / ^ / ^ / Fourteen to /**twelve**.

//5 ^ / ^ You can /turn the /**light** out /now.

Text 2. A sports commentary.

From an SFL perspective, Warren dramatizes the final play in relation to the live action through the confluence of three main phonological features: his choice of tone group boundaries, his patterned use of silent beats, and his tone choices. Beginning with the tone group choices, Warren uses distinct tone groups to break the game up into discrete 'mini plays' of roughly the same length, involving a pass or a run. The controlling rhythm is established by Warren using one tone group per pass. This rhythm is continued when a player chooses not to pass, in which case Warren describes the run or the player in the relevant tone group. Thus for a viewer watching and listening, each tone group presents one quantum of play to be reacted to. In the following excerpt, the commentary is compared to the action that it describes:

Commentary	Actual match events
//3 ^ It's /gone a/way /there for /**Cronk**.	Smith **pass** to Cronk
//3 ^ To /give it /out /**wide**.	Cronk **pass** to Koroibete
//5 Here's /Koroi/**be**/te.	**run** by Koroibete
//5 ^ He's /got them /turning a/**round**.	**run** by Koroibete
//5 ^ It's /now with /Vuni/**va**lu.	Koroibete **pass** to Vunivalu
//5 ^ /Vuni/**va**lu.	**run** by Vunivalu
//5 ^ The /season's /top /**try** /scorer.	**run** by Vunivalu
//5 ^ /Got the /ball a/**way**.	Vunivalu **pass** to Bromwich

The unceasing regularity of Warren's tone groups, as shown by the repeated SFL annotations on each line above, progressively builds tension as the viewer waits for the resolution of play (and a pause from Warren). This tension is likely influenced by Warren's tone choice. The most common tone is the rising-falling Tone 5, often associated with exclamations like *Wow!*. This is a very marked choice, especially when repeated over and over, as it typically indicates surprise and counter-expectancy (Halliday & Greaves 2008). The repeated choice of Tone 5 thus likely signals that each mini-play is something theatrical or substantial – something really worth taking note of. It, in short, dramatizes the final play by flagging that each movement is *exciting*. Its regularity and repetition through the play increases this tension, without any release until the end.

But the end of the game is marked only by a very subtle shift. The Tone 5s remain: Cronulla winning the grand final is indeed surprising and exciting. But whereas through the final play a single silent beat supporting the driving rhythm began every tone group (shown by ^ at the beginning of each line), once the final tackle is made and Warren shifts to calling the result, he changes to two silent beats between the two statements of *Cronulla have won it*, then three silent beats before *Fourteen to twelve* and two more before *You can turn the lights out now*.[3]

//3 ^ It's /back / to /**Smith**.

//3 ^ Smith /gets it a/way to /**Cronk**.

//5 ^ /Cronk's /got /Koroi/**be**te / with him.

//5 ^ /Have they /got a /**chance** /here.

//5 ^ /Koroi/bete's /put /**down**.

//5 ^ The /siren /**sounds**.

//5 ^ Cro/nulla have /**won** it.

//5 ^ / ^ Cro/nulla have /**won** it.

//5 ^ / ^ / ^ / Fourteen to /**twelve**.

//5 ^ / ^ You can /turn the /**lights** out /now.

The shift from one silent beat to two and then three signals a release of tension – the driving rhythm has ended, and a breath can be taken before calling the culmination of the game and 50 years of waiting. Warren's call is a masterful one; but this is less so because of what he says – his description of the game is relatively straightforward – but more because of how he says it. He sets up a driving beat where everything is unexpected, and then at the finality, releases that tension only ever so slightly to call the final, climactic words: *Cronulla have won it. Cronulla have won it. Fourteen to twelve. You can turn the light out now*.

[3] This line is a reference to a famous saying by former Cronulla coach Jack Gibson that waiting for Cronulla to win a grand final is like leaving the porch light on for Harold Holt. Harold Holt was an Australian Prime Minister who, while in office, went for a swim at a beach and disappeared, presumed drowned. Leaving the porch light on thus refers to vain hope.

Grasping how this moment generates such affective force for viewers requires a close analysis of the phonological choices at play. Here, SFL's toolkit proves especially powerful: it makes visible the tone groups that align with the action, the tone choices that index surprise and excitement, the rhythmic pulses (spoken and silent) that shape the pace and emotional texture of the call. Crucially, these resources do not operate separately from meaning; they are central to it. In this highly dynamic, spoken, and time-sensitive register, the sound of language is the primary means by which meaning is made. As we turn to the final example, we shift even further along the mode continuum into language in action, where immediacy, physical co-presence, and task orientation place new demands on how language functions in real-world activity.

Playing sport

While sports language can range from reflective, carefully structured texts to language deeply embedded in the moment of action, perhaps the most extreme form of language-in-action occurs in the short, shouted instructions exchanged between players and coaches during live play. Unlike commentary, which constructs an evolving account of action for an external audience, or written sports journalism, which retrospectively shapes sporting events into coherent interpretations, this form of sports language is highly situational and urgent, relying on the physical environment and shared understanding to carry much of the meaning. This final analysis examines these in-the-moment utterances, drawn from Doran, Caldwell & Ross (2021), to demonstrate how language adapts under time pressure, shifting from conventional grammatical patterns to more fragmentary, phonologically-driven forms. By exploring examples from a volleyball training session and an Australian rules football game, we illustrate how, in the context of actively playing sport, the semiotic burden of meaning shifts progressively from lexicogrammar to intonation, rhythm, and finally voice quality patterns, a shift that exemplifies the dynamic adaptability of language in high-intensity sports contexts.

As Doran, Caldwell and Ross (2021) argue, texts at the more extreme end of the language-in-action continuum show a gradual shift in the division of semiotic labour. This comprises, in SFL's conception of language, a progressive shift from higher to lower levels of language. In terms of what SFL calls strata – the levels of language ordered by abstraction from genre to register to discourse semantics to lexicogrammar to phonology – grammatical patterns begin to hand over to phonological patterns; in terms of what SFL calls rank – the relation of constituency between, say, clause, group/phrase, word and morpheme – clause-based meanings in the grammar hand over to phrases/groups and the word, and intonational and rhythmic patterns in phonology hand over to the syllable and voice quality.

To see this dynamic, we will begin with a volleyball coach setting up a training drill called *Bernadinho* (after a well-known Brazilian coach):

> All right, first game, Bernardinho compulsory two-touch, dig or set only to begin with. Okay, let's have this half go to that end, that court, this half spread out on this court. Two on two, compulsory two-touch.

This text displays many typical features of language-in-action texts such as using reference to the physical situation (e.g. *<u>this</u> half* ; *go to <u>that</u> end, <u>that</u> court* known as *exophoric* reference).

But the text does more than this. Notably, much of the text does not draw on full clauses with Processes (main verbs), but rather set up its meanings through sequences of nominal groups (here marked by {..}):

> All right, {first game}, {Bernardinho} {compulsory two-touch},
>
> {Two on two}, {compulsory two-touch}.

These nominal group complexes are functional in this situation, even if they are not 'grammatical' in the commonly understood sense. There is little interpersonal ambiguity that these are commands to the players and the coach uses enough technicality to indicate what he wants. As Doran, Caldwell & Ross (2021: 282) note, this example illustrates a general principle of language-in-action texts: because speakers can rely on the situation for much of the meaning, they tend to say only just enough to convey their message.

The second example also illustrates this principle. Here a coach gives feedback to players *during* a training drill: each line responds to a different player's action:

- Good platform, Rosie.
- Elbows to target.
- Yes, Nater.
- Elbows to target, Bella, wherever your elbows go, the ball's going to go there, forward it that way or this way. Keep cutting it off.
- Good balance, Kara.
- That's it Rosie, way to get under it.
- On the line; see if you can get back, instead of there, just a little deeper, okay.
- Weight forward, Kara.
- Snap it.
- Good.
- Good shape, Nic.

The coach gives positive feedback through generalised attitude *good* or the Mood Adjunct *yes*. The shared situation means that what is good about the action will typically be clear and so no more is needed. If the coach does give more, they typically just specify a target for their evaluation, e.g. *good platform*, *good balance*, *good shape*.

When giving directions for future actions, the coach regularly uses *cues* – short, sharp, technical words or phrases repeated as commands to players. Cues again typically avoid using verbs (though not entirely, as in *snap it*), instead relying on nominal groups and/or prepositional phrases:

- Elbows to target
- Elbows to target
- On the line
- Weight forward

At times there is an expansion into full clauses, but this occurs when a player is taken aside and spoken to away from the drill, as in: *wherever your elbows go, the ball's going to go there, forward it that way or this way. Keep cutting it off*. That is, it occurs in the slightly more language-as-reflection situations (hence once more, SFL's view of mode helps explain a pattern in the text).

The principle of meaning being handed from higher levels of language to lower levels as we move into more language-in-action texts is further illustrated through players' talk during games. The following texts are from a player directing his teammates off the ball in an Australian rules football match. These texts typically comprise just a repeated verb and an adverb:

- push up
  push up

- push across
  push across
  push across

- go
  go
  go

The restricted grammatical choices used in such texts mean that these texts prioritise the player's phonology as the primary resource for meaning. But even here there is a flattening of higher-level phonological patterns. Each example is said on a falling Tone 1, typical for commands, but the tone contour is flattened, making it less distinguishable from other tones. However, this is not an issue, because in the situation of a player yelling instructions at a teammate, there is little ambiguity that these are commands rather than questions or statements. This flattening continues into these texts' rhythms, where unstressed syllables are dropped through lexical choice or phonological reduction, leaving only stressed syllables; and in the syllable and phoneme, with deletions of the Coda (final consonant), and reductions of dipthongs to monopthongs. Thus whereas the idealised phonetic analysis of the above examples would be:

[pʊʃ ʌp]	(push up)
[pʊʃ əkros]	(push across)
[gəʊ]	(go)

They are in fact pronounced:

[pʊʃ ʌ]	(removing the final [p])
[pʊʃ kro]	(removing both the [ə] and the [s])
[go]	(reducing the [əʊ] to [o])

There is nonetheless not a loss of meaning, because at the same time there is an expanded emphasis on voice quality and timing. In terms of SFL's modelling of the voice (van Leeuwen 1999), the primary variables here include volume, length, speed and repetition of sounds.

To see this, we will look at two examples thar exclusively use the word *Coby*. The first involves a player unsuccessfully calling for the ball from a free kick:

/ Co by / Co by / Co by / Co by / CO / BY / CO / BY /

The timing, length and volume of this example is represented by Figure 2 (from Doran, Caldwell & Ross 2021: 296). Following Caldwell's (2014) conventions for representing sound,

the height of the ovals indicate the loudness of the syllable; the width represents the syllable length; the spacing indicates the length of silence, and the whole thing is presented on two lines representing 1.9 seconds each.

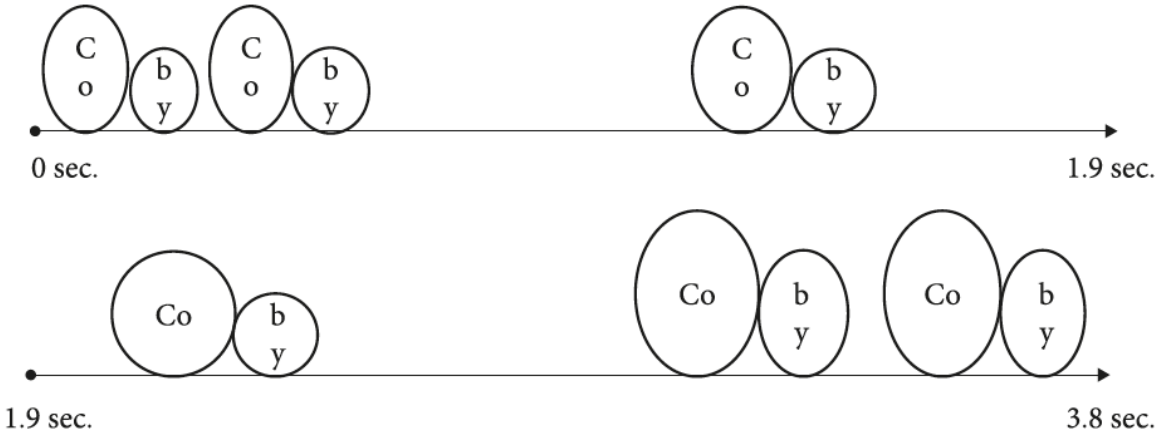

Figure 2. A player calling for the ball during a free kick (from Doran, Caldwell & Ross 2021: 296)

Here a player calls for the ball using the word *Coby* 6 times in 3.8 seconds, in four bursts of increasing loudness and length. This occurs as the player is running past his teammate taking a free kick and signals a progressively increasing desperation as he realises his teammate is not going to kick it to him.

By contrast, the following example from the same player comes in an extremely intense-moment, when his teammate Coby suddenly gets the ball surrounded by a number of opposition players coming in for a tackle. This time our player calls for the ball and receives it:

/ yeah / CO BY / CO BY / CO BY /

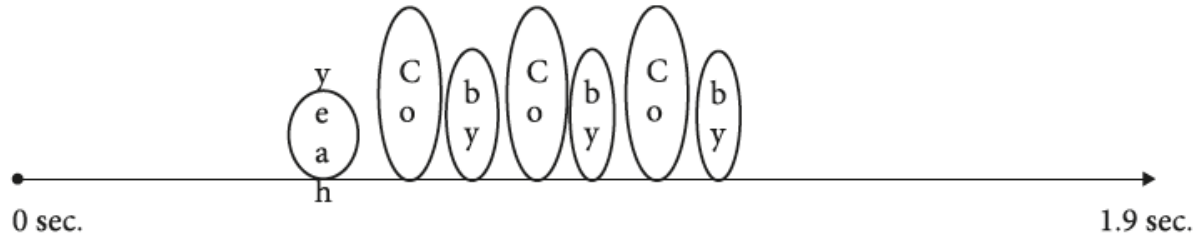

Figure 3. A player calling for the ball during intense action. From Doran, Caldwell & Ross (2021: 296)

Coby has the ball for less than a second – any longer and he would be tackled – and so our player calls for it urgently, yelling seven syllables in 0.75 seconds. The speed this player repeats his call has a two-fold purpose: one is to simply get the message out quickly enough for Coby to pass the ball. But the second is to symbolise phonologically the urgency with which the ball needs to be passed. The phonology here is not just for efficiency (if this were the case, there would just be one call of *Coby*.) It is also deeply meaningful: the speed, pitch, and repetition of the call symbolise the pressure of the moment, signalling not just what needs to be done, but

how urgently. In this context of immediate action, prosodic features carry interpersonal force, demanding alignment, shaping in-the-moment coordination and reinforcing the temporal intensity of play.

Sport, Language and SFL

The language of sport is diverse and dynamic –ranging from reflective written texts to highly compressed, real-time utterances during play – and understanding this variability requires a model of language that can operate across multiple contexts and levels of analysis. This chapter has argued that Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides such a model: one that views language as a social semiotic resource, shaped by and shaping its context of use. Drawing on examples from cricket writing, rugby league commentary and on-field volleyball and Australian rules coaching and play, this chapter has shown how SFL allows researchers to analyse not just what is said in sporting contexts, but how meaning is made through genre patterns, register variation, and linguistic resources spanning discourse semantics, lexicogrammar and phonology. In doing so, it has illustrated how language in sport adapts to context, often in radical ways, and how SFL's integrated theory of strata, ranks, and metafunctions can account for this adaptability.

A key feature of this chapter has been to demonstrate the value of mode as an analytical concept for language and sport research. Mode draws attention to the communicative role that language plays in a given context, – whether it is reflective and textually self-contained, or dependent on physical co-presence and shared activity. Understanding language as existing along a mode continuum helps us explain why language behaves differently in, say, a match report, a live commentary, or a shouted on-field instruction.

Ultimately, this chapter has sought to show that SFL is adaptable to a wide range of sporting contexts in which language is used. For researchers aiming to understand language as it occurs in lived, situated activity, SFL provides both a comprehensive model of language and a toolkit for analysing it in action.

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