

Chapter 1

Sports Linguistics: Speaking and Doing

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Sport is a major component of modern social, economic and cultural life. In recent decades, particularly with technological developments in new media productions and consumption, sport has become even more ingrained in peoples' lives. Indeed, sport continues to grow and evolve and can be said to be in a state of rapid expansion, including, for example, in the areas of women's sport, parasports and junior sports (Department of Health, 2018). Sport as social and cultural activity is providing increasing opportunities for participating players, coaches and administrators, as well as for the non-participating fans, supporters and consumers of sport (Australian Coaching Council, 2018). Alongside this social impact, evolution and increased participation is sports scholarship that seeks to better understand and theorize sport, and our engagement with it.

In the context of sports coaching for example, there has been immense growth in the participation, investment and expertise of parents and caregivers working in junior and amateur sports (or 'community coaching'). Similarly, high-performance professional sports coaching has seen unprecedented levels of expansion and financial investment; sports coaching is an industry. In turn, this has informed scholarship, as new theories, models and ideas about best practice in sports coaching continue to emerge and transform the field. It is beyond the scope of this introduction, and this book more generally, to review the immense field of sports coaching. This book is about the language-in-action of players/athletes and coaches. Moreover, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to try to compose such a review without acknowledging 'coaching' scholarship outside of sport, including the related fields of sports science, education, psychology, sociology and the like. However, we do wish to cite one key publication that offers a neat introduction to research in sports coaching, and captures, to some extent at least, the current state of expansive (and expanding) scholarship in sport more generally: *Understanding Sports Coaching: The Social, Cultural and Pedagogical Foundations of Coaching Practice* (Cassidy et al., 2009). Like this book, Cassidy et al.'s (2009) work is fundamentally social (and educational) in nature: "coaching, in whatever guise it is packaged, is essentially a social, educational enterprise" (p. 9). This is an important position to articulate within the very broad world of sports scholarship, where a lot of research is based on 'transmission' models of human relations in sport, and informed by disciplines such as psychology and physiology, or, as Cassidy et al. (2004, p. 10) define it: "the bioscientific, product-orientated discourse".

A focus on the social aspect of sport necessarily brings into play a consideration of communication in sport; as it is only via our various modes of communication that we can possibly interact in the playing and teaching/learning of sport. Sport involves not just the doing

of sport, it also involves the talking in and about sport. In this sense, linguistics has not been immune to this expansion of scholarship exploring sport, and indeed in recent years we have seen the birth of what we could call the field of ‘sports linguistics’ (e.g. Benson & Coxhead, 2022; Caldwell et al., 2016; Doran et al., 2021; File, 2022; Graf et al. 2023; Ross & Rivers, 2019; Walsh et al. 2024).

As social linguists (e.g., Caldwell et al., 2016), we position ourselves, and this book, at the interface of language and the social. In this way, it is a complement to the “bioscientific” approaches to not only sports coaching, but to sports scholarship more generally. Of course, this is a challenging position to take as it requires a unique and detailed knowledge of a wide range of variables in any given sports context, not least of which is knowledge of how players communicate with other players, and how coaches and players communicate. While there has been much scholarly attention given to sports language and discourse through reactions to and reflections on sporting events, in contexts such as live commentary (e.g., Ross & Rivers, 2019) or media interviews (e.g., Caldwell, 2009), there is far less research targeting communication during actual sporting events. And this makes sense. It is simply harder to acquire this data, and it does not easily intersect with other established fields such as media studies. However, we would also argue that outside of linguistics, spoken discourse, especially of players participating in sport, is often negatively stereotyped and misunderstood as unsophisticated, deprived and even non-linguistic. On the other hand, within linguistics, sports language, if it is even considered at all, is dismissed as being peripheral to an understanding of language in general for which the archetypes are the twin poles of casual conversation and written text. For us, it is important to know more about how players and coaches interact in-the-moment of *doing* sport, and it is from this point that the present volume emerges.

Before proceeding, it is important for us to acknowledge that research does exist within the broad category of what we might simply call: “language in the doing of sport”. For example, again in the context of coach and player talk, there is a significant amount of research that has examined the feedback provided by coaches to players, or what is technically referred to as Augmented Verbal Feedback (AVF). In fact, Corbett et al. (2024) provide a systematic review of over 31 studies in the field of coach feedback, in sport, during practice and team sports. Similarly, and again within the specific context of coach to player in-game talk in sport, Mason (2020) and Mason et al. (2020) have applied theories and frameworks from educational psychology to real-time professional sporting events. To be clear: this is only one specific subset of research – linguistic feedback between coach and players – within the world of ‘language in the doing of sport’. The point is that we do not want to give the impression that work does not exist. When we talk of ‘limited’ research in this field, we are specifically talking about limited research undertaken by linguists, and especially socially-oriented linguists working in/with methods of applied linguistics, such as conversation analysis, corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, interactional sociolinguistics and systemic functional linguistics, as applied to language expressed in the doing of a given sporting event. We would also make the point that the coach to player feedback scholarship cited above, for example, tends to fit more within a ‘bio-scientific’, performance-based paradigm. Whereas we, very broadly, position ourselves with a social-semiotic (language) based paradigm, with an interest in analysing language for the purpose of better understanding players and coaches as social beings doing sport, as distinct from analysing language for the purpose of measuring, predicting and validating the sporting performance of players and coaches.

It is important therefore to begin this introduction, and this edited volume more generally, by acknowledging the growing body of scholarly sports linguistics work in social linguistics that has emerged in recent times. As Caldwell et al. (2016) explain, this canon can be helpfully conceptualized using Gee’s (1990) notion of big ‘D’ and little ‘d’ discourse. A lot of work in social linguistics and sport takes a broad (big ‘D’) Discourse-based approach,

whereby the focus of this research is not so much the actual sports under study in isolation, but rather that sport and its language practices, provide a means for researchers to explore various social and cultural issues *through* sport. Examples of this include issues such as gender (e.g., Bruce, 2013; Messner, 2013) and race (e.g., Eagleman & Martin, 2013), and which have been addressed through media representations of different sports and/or athletes. The growth of the new media environment, especially social media, has also led to a surge in research related to language and sport. Examples of studies situated in this space include sports such as cycling and long-distance running and how athletes within these sporting contexts communicate online their sporting activity on platforms including Instagram and Twitter (e.g., Lamont & Ross, 2020; Ross & Zappavigna, 2020; Thorpe, 2017; Tovaes, 2020). While these studies do place an explicit focus on the sport itself, the language use involved alongside the use of multimodal communicative practices, has always been central. This has been shown in studies such as that by Serazio (2010), who demonstrated how a sporting team (New Orleans Saints) was used as a symbol of metaphorical recovery following the disaster of Hurricane Katrina. Similarly, Ross and Rivers (2019) looked specifically at media broadcast commentary from the famous cycling race, *Le Tour de France*, and revealed how the “Sport is War” metaphor is frequently utilised to highlight the strategy and challenge involved in the sport of professional cycling (or “road racing”). Such work points to the diverse areas of interest in how language is used *about* sport. At the same time, it accentuates the lack of work that exists pertaining to how language is used *in* and *during* sport.

The extant research in sports and linguistics also includes a closer language analysis (or small ‘d’ discourse in Gee’s [1990] terms), which is often used to then inform broader social and cultural issues in sport. As Doran et al. (2021, p. 277) explain: “linguistic studies of sport have emphasised that sport itself is a rich communicative activity, with a diversity and plurality in its discourse”. Similarly, Caldwell et al. (2016) note that linguists are presented with an array of genres, registers, grammars and lexis that exist across sports and cultural sporting contexts. This diversity of discourse also warrants attention in the language-in-action of those participating in the sporting event itself, which, for the most part, has been lacking. The focus therefore in this volume on both the *doing* of sport and the language use associated with this sporting action comes from Doran et al.’s (2021, p. 275) assertion that “language is used to get things done”, and that this is never truer than in the context of sport. When sport is taking place, players need to organise themselves and each other, and coaches also need to play their role in doing this. There is a need for team and player strategy to be confirmed and enacted, or for the play of an opposing team or individual to be countered. Thus, we can say that language use has a very specific goal in such circumstances – often a concrete physical outcome and an associated emotional/affective one. Coaches for example rely on language for player management and game strategy; commentators obviously rely on it to communicate actions and plays to listeners or viewers; and crowds use it to engage in the spectacle of live sporting events, supporting their team or heckling the opposition. To exemplify this, we can look to the recent work of Walsh et al. (2024), who closely examine (small ‘d’ discourse) the role of the evaluative language of crowds, commentators and coaches in sport. In all of these contexts, language was functional; it had a clear social purpose. In the case of crowds, for example, their singing and chanting built solidarity between supporters (or distance with the opposition); the commentators attempted to captivate an audience through their dramatic narrativizing of the ensuing sporting event; and the coaches, as noted in this volume too, used language to motivate and moralise their players.

Of course, any account of language use in sport demands a recognition of its capacity to shift and adapt in response to different situations and contexts in sport. To understand and explore this relationship between language and situation, we draw on Halliday’s theorization of mode (Halliday 1979; Halliday & Hasan 1985), and in particular, Martin’s (1992)

conceptualization of the mode cline; from language-as-reflection to language-in-action: “the degree to which language is constitutive or ancillary to what is happening in any situation” (Doran et al., 2021, p. 275). In this current volume, we are focussed on the constitutive; foregrounding language in sport that is constitutive of the ensuing action (or ‘happening’), which Martin (1992) has termed ‘language-in-action’, and that can be conceptualized as language that is more dependent on its immediate context, as distinct from ancillary language which can function (make meaning) independent of the immediate environment in which it is enacted (Hasan, 1973; Martin & Matruglio, 2020).

As noted already, research in social linguistics and sport has tended to address language from a more constitutive perspective when compared to the language in the doing of sport, in terms of reactions to and reflections on the sporting event, such as commentary from journalists, pre-game speeches from coaches, and post-match interviews from players and journalists. At the same time, work is starting to emerge from within sports linguistics that attempts to get closer to language-in-action. In fact, we would encourage readers to look at the previous work from contributors to this volume – including File (2022a, 2022b), Benson (Benson & Coxhead 2022) and Wilson (2010) – all of whom, to varying extents, have begun to explore language-in-action in their respective sporting contexts. Similarly, Caldwell for example has recently begun to examine language-in-action in sport, including the on-field talk of elite junior level Aboriginal Australian footballers (Caldwell et al. 2017, Caldwell 2023, Cominos et al. 2019), as well as the highly mediatized and televised productions of language-in-action recordings of athletes (and now coaches) from professional sporting leagues (Caldwell 2020). The former research has a broad agenda, drawing on the language analysis to develop educational resources for Aboriginal Australian students based on their on-field language, as well as exploring issues of leadership, masculinity and Aboriginal culture in/through their on-field language. The work with highly edited televised productions of language-in-action in professional sport, including in this volume, has explored issues of identity, stance and mediatization, or the question: what kind of in-game athlete ‘voices’ are presented to their viewing audience?

The canon of analyses of language-in-action in sport is emerging, and though it is still small in size, it is far from narrow in scope. Put another way: there is clearly scholarly interest, expertise and emerging linguistic descriptions at the intersection of social linguistics and language-in-action in sport. And that is precisely the aim of this volume: drawing on the experts to provide a platform for new research on language-in-action in sport, focusing specifically on players and coaches, and their language use while the sport is taking place.

Overview of the Volume

The chapters in this volume are bound together by the shared focus on, and dedication to, exploring the role of language-in-action across a diverse range of sporting contexts. Together, the 11 chapters highlight the vital role of language and the variations in use that occur in these contexts, ranging from short bursts of sound in high intensity moments of action, to non-verbal paralanguage, to mediatized language that mixes socialisation with physical exertion, among other things. Significantly, the chapters are underpinned by a range of theoretical and analytical frameworks and approaches from the domains of linguistics and education, which provides further value to the insights offered within them.

Overall, the volume is organised into two principal parts that explore how players communicate during games, and how coaches engage with players in ways that broaden our understandings of sports pedagogies. Part I presents a set of innovative studies that explore player-talk during games, including the enactment of leadership on the basketball court, the

control of emotions in high-pressure Formula 1 races, the wide vocabulary needed in rugby, and methods for organising (or socializing) fellow cyclists during bunch rides. These studies illustrate the wide-variety of contexts that represent 'in-game' communication in sports and the intricate linguistic resources that athletes must master in order to effectively engage with such scenarios. Part II comprises targeted research on coach communication so as to underpin pedagogical development in sport. The chapters articulate the means through which coaches parallel and accommodate the language of their players, the interpersonal stances of in-game professional coach talk and how these are represented in the media, the linguistic means of setting up drills, giving instructions and distributing information during training, and how technical feedback creates performance change, as well as how this can be turned toward language-based pedagogies in sporting contexts. Together, these chapters present theoretically informed and highly practical resources for understanding how players and coaches communicate across a wide range of sports. An overview of the individual chapter contributions is provided in the following paragraphs.

Chapter 1 is authored by Anastasia Stavridou, and its core focus is on leadership within the context of team sports. The target sport is that of basketball, and more specifically a university basketball team in the United Kingdom. The author seeks to explore the ways that leadership and followership are enacted in a discursive manner by the players in the team, rather than only those who hold a designated leadership role. In the context of the focus of the current volume, the findings thus extend beyond increasing our understanding language use in sporting contexts and has implications for how we understand leadership in general. In Chapter 2, Kieran File approaches language in sport from the perspective of engineers and drivers in the high speed and high-pressure sport of Formula 1 motor racing. Specifically, the context is a live Formula 1 race event, and File explores the communicative practices involved between the participants in terms of emotion regulation and how talk can play a vital role in addressing the negative effects of pressure on sports people. The discourse analytical approach used is rooted in pragmatics and focuses in particular on time-gap messages as playing an important role in emotion regulation rather than being purely informational and transactional. The author seeks to demonstrate how a discourse approach to this context provides nuanced evidence of emotional regulation in action.

The nature of vocabulary in the team-based sport of rugby union forms the primary focus of Chapter 3, which is authored by Stuart Benson. By adopting a corpus-based approach, Benson establishes a lexical profile based on authentic interactions in a range of rugby situations. This forms the basis of a focused analysis of technical vocabulary used in these situations and the development of technical word lists that can be utilised as pedagogical tools in training for rugby and learning about the game, with the ultimate aim of improving communication within the sport.

In Chapter 4, the focus shifts to the sport of cycling. The author of the chapter, Andrew S. Ross, focuses on the phenomenon of the 'group' or 'bunch' ride, within a broad context of non-professional, social cycling but with cyclists of a high level of ability and enthusiasm. The chapter focuses on data recorded in audiovisual form of three different, competent cyclists in differing locations and explores the language use of the subject (and others) across the entire ride. This includes language use related to ride preparation, language for safety, cycling metadiscourse, and then talk, while riding, that is unrelated to the sport. Adopting the theoretical approach of interactional sociolinguistics, Ross focuses on both the social and the organisational aspects to understand how language is used to establish different contexts and to ensure the safety of the group while maintaining the crucial social and organisational elements.

Chapter 5 is the first chapter in Part II, focusing on coach discourse, and is another contribution to the volume that uses rugby union as its context. The author, Nick Wilson, builds

on previous work to examine the communication practices of rugby coaches across the dual contexts of training and match-day. The research in the chapter is underpinned by interactional sociolinguistics (as with Chapter 4) as well as an ethnographic approach to data analysis. The analysis itself focuses explicitly on how the coaches under study utilise personal pronouns, on the one hand, and then address terms, on the other, in player-directed speech events. It is pointed out that the findings align with similar research in the literature from other sports and sporting teams, suggesting that we continue to grow our understanding of coach-player interactions across sporting contexts.

David Caldwell, the author of Chapter 6, approaches language-in-action in the sporting context of coaches using ‘mic’d up’ texts. The ‘mic’d up’ text refers to discourse captured in real-time professional sports via publicly available, mediated data, captured and produced for the purposes of televised (‘entertainment’) sports coverage. The author seeks to extend previous work on the distribution of semiotic labour in language-in-action in sports and to demonstrate how this takes place in the contexts of in-play and time-out moments in the National Basketball Association (NBA). Focusing on professional coaches, he explores the changes (and ‘break down’) of language at the clause level during these high-pressure, in-play and time-out moments.

In Chapter 7, Y. J. Doran and Lilián I. Ariztimuño, address a similar aspect of language-in-action to Caldwell, but through data collected in the context of beach volleyball training. The authors focus specifically on the context of coaches and draw on the linguistic theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics to unpack and explain the ways that coaches organise the information they must get across when setting up and organising training drills. The chapter makes a significant contribution to our understanding of language in action by progressing a generalised model of resources for distributing information through the register variable known as mode. The model allows us to see how coaches present their messages within the strict confines of time associated with sport in a way that enables players to grasp and engage with the most important meanings.

The coach-athlete interface is again the focus in Chapter 8, authored by John Lyle, Ian Renshaw and John Williams. In this chapter, the authors focus on the sport of alpine skiing and position the research at the communicative interface between coaches and the junior athletes they coach. Through audio recorded data, the differing coaching styles and language use of different coaches is explored with a specific emphasis on the provision of feedback to the young skiers and how this translates to changes in performance. The study is underpinned by pedagogical approaches to coaching in combination with a detailed understanding of coach-athlete interaction.

The authors of Chapter 9 – Fergus O’Dwyer and Ian Sherwin – investigate youth-level sport in relation to player preferences for in-game communications with team management and coaches within the geographical context of Ireland and across different sports. Their research targets, in particular, the half-time interval as a time when planning for the remainder of a context should be prioritised along with athlete recovery. The study reveals that when utilised effectively, in-game communication between athletes and coaches provides a significant opportunity for player contribution to performance development, diverse input from different coaches, and can help better understand ways to mitigate negative messaging to players, which is especially important at the youth level.

In Chapter 10 – the final chapter of the volume – Elena Lambrinos focuses on ballet. While typically not classed as a sport, the author makes clear that like sports coaching, ballet teaching works to train the body. But also like sports coaching, it does more than this: it helps develop how dancers act, think and feel. With regard to the context of this volume and the emphasis on the language of coaches and athletes in the moment, Lambrinos explores the ways in which ballet teachers (the analogue to sports coaches) impart dance skills to their students

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at the same time as traits aligned with what ballet dancers should *be* like. Through the lens of Legitimation Code Theory, the author highlights that while the traits or dispositions of ballet dancers are developed and manifest in various ways, the actual method of teaching is a model of consistency through detailed and concrete actions.

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