

Language of Online Sport Commentary: Matches played by the Super Eagles of Nigeria at the African Cup of Nations 2013

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Abstract

This paper examines the language of online sport commentary on matches played by Nigeria's Super Eagles at the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) 2013 tournament by examining some lexical items. The research design is a descriptive survey and the theoretical framework adopted for the research is the Electronic Register Methodology Framework (FERM). A total of six matches were played by the Super Eagles, two were randomly selected and analysed. Findings from the study reveal: the use of proper nouns consistently in football commentary is for clarity and recognition. Identifications of the actions being performed are conveyed by lexical and phrasal verbs. They create in the audience a mental picture of the event happening. The paper can only be generalised within AFCON 2013 and can be used for further research purposes. This paper will assist people to understand better sport commentary by the lexical items that are significantly used in online sport commentary.

Keywords: Africa Cup of Nations, matches, football, language

Introduction

Language is the code through which humans communicate with one another. The main essence of language is for communication. There are numerous definitions of language which support the opinion that language is basically used as a means of communication. According to Bloomfield and Newmark (1963, p.12), "language... is fundamentally the means by which men communicate with each other and with themselves, and by which they express themselves." Another notable definition has been offered by Edwin Sapir (1921). In Sapir's view, "language... is purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desire by means of voluntarily produced symbols" (p.25). In other words, a language is used for social and functional communication purposes. Humans employ language in different social activities, including communication and self-expression.

Sport is one of the many social activities that bring people together. Language is used in sporting activities by players, officials and spectators for the sole purpose of communication. The advancement in technology makes it possible for the mass media to relay events happening at particular sport centres to people who are at home via television, radio and the internet. In relaying the event, the media employ

language to communicate. Those in the mass media also employ the use of language. Though language is used in virtually all sporting activities, the participation in communication and the nature of language are not the same. The situation and other sociological features make the language different in terms of the choice of lexical items, sentence structure and meaning. Halliday (1978) summarised the differences in three major aspects: the field, mode and tenor of discourse. Sport commentary is one such instance where language usage has peculiarities because the field is different from other fields like engineering, medicine; the mode and tenor are also different in interpersonal relationship and content of discourse. Sport commentary also has subtypes in language use which are mainly determined by the medium of the commentary. Studies have been carried out on the nature of the language of sport commentary on the television and the radio. Based on my literature search none has been done in the event of online football commentary, especially on matches played by the Super Eagles in AFCON 2013.

Arguably, football is the most popular sport in Nigeria. Accordingly, it is important to inquire into the nature and use of language features peculiar to football commentaries with a focus on the matches played by the Super Eagles at the Africa Cup of Nations 2013. This is to aid the close study of the nature of the language used in terms of the lexical items.

In this section, two selected commentaries for this paper are going to be analysed paying close attention to the linguistic features under three aspects: the lexical items, the sentence structure and the semantic implication of language used in online sports commentary using the Electronic Register Template (ERT).

Lexical

Lexical Items: Lexical items in language studies are the words in a language. Languages communicate by using words and the use of language for communication is embedded in the use of words. Words are not just arbitrarily used they are tied to the situation and environment where the words are being used. According to Halliday, this is known as register. That is, language according to the function or situation. The words or the lexical items used in one situation differ from another, though there might be points where they are related. In the language of online sport commentary, the lexical items play a major role and mark a distinctive point from other language uses.

In online football commentary, there are specific lexical items that are used recurrently which mark the aspect of the register. In most cases the meaning of the words are going to be analysed. In looking at the lexical items, the analysis is going to be divided into different word classes.

Proper Nouns: In the simplest term, a noun is the part of speech that is used for naming. That is it states the name of persons, animals, and things generally. In most cases with the Super Eagles matches at AFCON 2013, the online commentaries are filled with nouns, the names of people and the counties they are from. Here are some extracts from the online football commentaries between Nigeria and Zambia.

18'-Kalaba's free kick is blasted wide off target.

17'- *Big scare for Nigeria as Enyeama spills a tap-in from a right cross. The Eagles are passing the ball very well among themselves now, must be the confidence from the opening goal.*

15'- *Mbesuma's shot is weak and Enyeama holds easily.*

12'- *GOAL! It was hard work by Ahmed Musa from the right and his cut back is met by Kalu Uche for the opening goal.*

From the above extract, most of the nouns used are names of people and countries which occur significantly, compared to other lexical items. The reason for this is that the commentary seeks to inform its audience of what is happening on the pitch and the major actors are the players and coaches. There are eleven players in the field of play. To properly identify the individual carrying out an action, their names are mentioned. Also this applies to the country. Since two countries are competing, at every point in time the name of the country a particular player is from, is presented to avoid confusion. It is worthy of note that the nouns used are always the Proper Nouns and the use of pronouns is very limited this is done to avoid confusion and for easy identification of the players.

Also, in the online commentary of Nigeria versus Burkina Faso proper nouns are also used in similar manner frequently.

87'- *Joseph Yobo replaces Sunday Mba*

86'- *Burkina Faso again contrived to give the ball away in their own box but Ideye is just beaten the ball by Diakite*

The extract above reveals that the use of names constantly to show who is performing a particular action is not restricted to the first commentary alone, but all the matches played in the tournament. Also worthy of note is the fact that it is not in all cases that the names or noun used is performing an action. For example, *Ideye feeds Uba just outside the box who lets rip with a shot that flies high and wide.* Both Ideye and Uba are nouns while Ideye is in the subject position performing the action. Mba on the other hand receives the action.

Additionally, the name of a player is given and the country is also given, but there are situations where the professional clubs they play for are also given as additional information for the audience. Example;

Fantastic challenge from Mikel!! the ball breaks to Traore inside the area and he looks poised to shoot on goal, but the Chealsea man comes in to poke the ball away at the final moment. Great defending!

In this case, the audience has to refer to Mikel as the Chelsea man, looking at the fact that he plays for Chelsea as a club and for Nigeria as a country. This demonstrates that a noun can also be used as a compliment, in these case appositives. The last noun gives more information about the first. We note that when a proper noun is used the country is mentioned before or after to better reinforce the identity of the person(s) performing the action. In the case of substitution of players, the countries are mentioned first in the sentence before the two players involved are presented, this increases the significance and occurrence of proper noun.

In the two matches analysed, the use of proper noun is very important and significant for the fact that an action without the subject and a clear object, create rooms for ambiguities on the part of the audience. Also, the use of proper nouns is significant in commentaries because it helps in easy identification of the performer of various actions.

Lexical Verbs: Generally, verbs are referred to as action. Football is a game of action; that is the motivation behind Bergh's 2011 study where he has focused on the comparison between football commentary and a war situation. Beard (1996) opines that football commentary on television, radio and the internet tend to refer to football as a war between two opponents but the difference between this and a war situation is that in football, there are no physical fatalities.

In online football commentaries, the actions are relayed to the audience through verbs. Two aspects of verbs are used majorly to relay actions in the commentary. These are lexical verbs and the phrasal verbs. The lexical verbs are main verbs that show actions, while the phrasal verb is the type that combines a lexical verb with a prepositional or an adverbial item. In the online commentaries of Super Eagles matches at AFCON 2013, the lexical and phrasal verbs are mainly used in the following extracts;

48'-Free kick to Nigeria after Chamanga handles the ball.

46'-James Chamanga has come in for Collins Mbesuma.

46'-Nigeria kicks of the second half.

65'-Another Zambian attack breaks down.

67'-There is really nothing much coming from the Nigerians now as Ejide has to come out of his post to clear another danger.

From what is shown in the above extract, both lexical and phrasal verbs, are used mainly to relate the actions on the pitch to the listening audience. The verbs; *come in*, *kick off* etc are all phrasal verbs. They combine verbs with a preposition or adverbial item or a combination of both items as in the case of "*come out*" in the above extract.

On the other hand, the lexical verbs, operate alone to relay the action and when used, they show real action such as; shot, kick, flow, handle. Another element common to the lexical verbs used is that they show movement in one way or the other. In the online commentary between Super Eagles and Burkina Faso, the two categories of verbs are also used in a similar way with the lexical verbs now significant. Another fact about phrasal verbs is that in some uses and in certain constructions, they take an idiomatic meaning, different from the isolative meaning of the words in the phrase.

Conclusion

Based on an analysis of the examples presented above regarding lexical items used in online commentaries, it seems reasonable to conclude that simple vocabulary items are majorly used which makes it significant in all the matches. The reason is based on the fact that readers of the commentaries have different levels of education. These words are simplified to suit the the reader at any level. There is a high level of significance attached to the use of lexical verbs in the commentaries analysed. Football is an action game that involves running, jumping, throwing, kicking, and so on. Naturally, one would expect in a sport like this to convey the physical realities of the happenings on the field of play. It is pertinent to note that a register is language used according to the function it performs for the speaker. Due to the specific and special uses the language is subjected to, it naturally shapes itself to accommodate all that is

needed in that particular field or function. The language of online football commentary is not an exception. Though it is the English language used, it is the English language that is made to perform special uses in the language structure. There is a consistent use of proper nouns, lexical and phrasal verbs. These are the special features of the language of online football commentary especially that of the Super Eagles matches.

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