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LINGUISTIC FEATURES AND SENTENCE STRUCTURES OF SPORTS
COMMENTARY IN BASKETBALL

BA thesis

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Abstract

This thesis takes a closer look at the linguistic features which are used in sports commentary. The paper was written out of personal interest to provide a brief overview of the characteristics of sports commentary and how it could be classified as an individual linguistic register. Sports commentary is a widely used practise and should be classified under a specific linguistic register. The purpose of this thesis is to analyse linguistic features used in sports commentary.

The study first covers a variety of aspects that define sports commentary overall, which is then followed by an analysis of specific features of the English language used in sports commentary. In order to study the linguistic features, four separate transcripts were made from different basketball games. The analytical section of this study was mainly supported by those transcripts as well as a few articles and books related to sports commentary.

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Introduction

Throughout the years, the NBA (National Basketball Association) has been known for their extremely talented players. They have high standards when choosing new players as well as high standards for broadcasting their games. In order to have a successful and an entertaining broadcast of a game, the league turns to prestigious networks such as ABC, ESPN and TNT. Each network is not only responsible for having skilled announcers but also analysts and reporters that figure out every niche and strategy that a team goes for in a game. The NBA is a highly sought-after league for basketball players around the world and it is a goal that many players do not achieve

Sports has always been a keen physical enjoyment for humans, and so has been the language of sports. In recent decades, the popularity of broadcasting sports games has become a big presence in media. This in turn means that the language of sports has become an important aspect of language and must be studied. One of the biggest contributors of producing sports language is the art of commentary. The language of sports is a medium for knowledge transfer, it features several linguistic levels such as phonetics, text, lexicology, morpho-syntax, discourse, communication and all on a cognitive level (Taborek. 2012: 238). Sports language is not only a monologue from commentators to the viewers, but also communication between players, referees, coaches and even the audience. Every idiom, expression and phrase that has something to do with sports, belongs to the language of sports.

The teams of the National Basketball Association are, for the most part, all-American, the Toronto Raptors being an exception. However, the players of all teams can be from wherever around the world. This means that not only do commentators have to know the names of all players, they must also be correct when pronouncing the names of players.

The aim of this study is to show how a language for sports commentary is formed announcers in the National Basketball Association. The study will first delve into the theoretical part of linguistic features and structures that sports announcers use and what defines basketball's commentary. For this, several articles and books will be used for reference and to define what characterizes the language used by basketball commentators.

The second part of this study will take a closer look at aspects such as: how announcers form sentences, what is their priority when discussing a game, what type of sentences are used and what are some of the key elements of language that commentators use. In addition, the study will take a look at the paralinguistic side of commentating a sports game.

Four different games and six different commentators were taken into consideration for this study. All four games took place during the 2018 Conference Finals. These games were chosen based on personal preference and to have four separate games where each team had won. This was done in order to have a closer look at how commentators would react to one team losing or winning, and how objective/subjective announcers and analysts would be.

1. Theoretical background

1.1 Register

There are five different types of linguistic registers in the English language: high formal, formal, neutral, informal and vulgar (Haines. 2019: para. ³). The NBA commentators, as well as many other sports casters, use a combination of the informal and the neutral register. This means that the language used by the commentators cannot simply be defined as being related to one certain register.

The informal register can mainly be described as spoken English. It is the type of register every English-speaking person would use on a day-to-day basis. It is characterized as being simple, at times grammatically incorrect and incomplete (lacking full sentences), emotional, humorous, includes slang, idioms and clichés. The neutral register, on the other hand, is rather factual than emotional, has a limited use for complex sentences and, similarly to informal, uses slang. (Gates, 2014: para. ¹²). Thus, combining attributes from the neutral and the informal register, a different type of register is formed: sports commentary. Broadcasts of sporting events do not require complex sentences; simple sentences are perfect for conveying actions fast, especially during a basketball game. Basketball is a fast-paced game, where opposing teams have a limited time to complete their play. This means that commentators also have a limited time to broadcast their message and they do this by talking about facts quickly, they use emotion to connect with viewers and all the while use the informal use of language. The use of this type of register can be seen in the following example:

1) Mark Jackson: ***And** that time it's the switch on the pick and roll, **I like** the decision.*¹

The example starts with a conjunction, has personal feelings and lacks proper linkers. These features can be found throughout sports commentary in basketball and are a part of defining its register.

¹ All examples in this thesis are numbered sequentially under each section and start with the speaker. The example sentences are in italic, have a font size of 11 and the feature in focus is in bold.

1.1.1 Identifying the register

The four games that have been taken into consideration showed that the language used by announcers and colour commentators cannot be defined as one certain register. During the Eastern Conference Finals, the main commentator was Mike Breen (play-by-play announcer), whom had help from Mark Jackson and Jeff Van Gundy, both colour commentators of the game. In the Western Conference Finals, the primary commentator was Marv Albert (play-by-play announcer), whom had help from Reggie Miller and Chris Webber, also both colour commentators.

The commercial side of sport evolved alongside other forms of entertainment (Rowe, 1999:21). Having introduced sports to media meant that people could be informed of games without the need to travel to see it for themselves. Viewers were finally able to see and hear games from the comfort of their own homes. Bringing sports to media has had an impact on culture as well, it gave people something to talk about, something which others might not have seen, heard or noticed. It was just another thing to talk about and sports enthusiasts, even those who only enjoyed listening and watching sports games, could share and enjoy common topics.

On the other hand, having introduced sports to media meant new jobs, mainly sports journalism. Commentator's talk (furtherly known now as CT) is comprised of a combination of the neutral and the informal register. This means that CT is a mixture of talking about plays at hand, advertisements, side-comments, statistics, history, etc. Commentators talk about everything they deem worthy to share with the audience, as long as it keeps the game interesting and exciting. By using this type of register to communicate to the audience commentators are free to express their feelings towards the game but are required to be professional. Due to the NBA games not having an age restriction, the announcers and colour commentators are required to keep their CT family friendly. The National Basketball Association is watched by people of all ages and thus the commentators must remain professional in their field of expertise.

1.1.2 Fixed phrases in commentary

One of the first key elements of identifying the register of sports commentary is the use of fixed phrases. In order to correctly express actions happening on the field, commentators use fixed phrases which are mandatory, but must convey the correct information. However, Commentators often develop linguistic strategies to deal with the repetitiveness. It is understandable that sports announcers cannot change how the game is meant to be conveyed, but they can change the way they convey it (change in tone, pitch, emphasis on words, etc). This type of fixedness is mostly found within play-by-play announcers, as they have the job of conveying actions happening on the field. Thus, play-by-play announcers are required to use frequent phrases and sentences that are an invaluable part of sports commentary. On the other hand, this fixedness of phrases provides a more fluent convention of words as well as saves time. Without having to produce new ways of conveying actions, commentators can use the typical phrases that define sports commentary. These fixed phrases are specific to each sport and varies quite a lot. In basketball, some of the common fixed phrases are: to shoot, to block, to rebound, to guard, etc. Some examples of fixed phrases from play-by-play announcers:

1) Mike Breen: *Love is looking to post-up, gets inside to Thompson. Thompson gathers, **can't connect**.*

2) Mike Breen: *Tatum finds Baynes, Baynes lets go on the base-line but **can't connect**.*

In both of these examples “*can't connect*” is a fixed phrase, meaning that a shot was either blocked or missed. The play-by-play announcer Mike Breen had to use said fixed phrase, however, decided to convey it in another way.

3) Marv Albert: *Iguodala **played** by Harden. Curry gets the step and for the drive.*

4) Marv Albert: *Harden with the switch, **played** by Curry.*

Further examples of fixed phrases, this time “*played*” meaning the action of being guarded by a member of the opposing team. The commentator again decided not to use the typical phrase “*guarded*” and used “*played*” instead. These conventions of fixed phrases can also be seen as trademarks of different commentators. Fixed phrases are not a requirement but are widely used in basketball commentary. Descriptions of events happening on the field,

however, are not defined and each commentator has free range to express an action however they feel like it, but it must express the correct action, thus creating certain fixed phrases. While the phrases may differ, their meaning remains the same.

1.1.3 Paralanguage

Paralanguage is an important aspect of human communication. This non-verbal part of any language plays an important role of connecting the link between words (Kang, 2013). Paralanguage can be either kinetic or vocal. This means that it manifests only in gestures and non-verbal sounds, either a change in tone, pitch or volume.

Using paralanguage is an invaluable part of CT. Commentators often change their tone, pitch, tempo and volume to create spontaneous speech. Spontaneous speech happens mainly when something of interest is happening on the playing-field, which in turn, makes the commentator drop his current topic and focus on what is happening on the field. By doing so, the commentator tries to convey his feelings of excitement or disappointment towards the audience. This in turn livens up the viewing or listening experience and creates more demand for such practise. This type of spontaneous speech works mainly for sports that do not have a lot of action happening in short periods of time, for example football, baseball, golf and many more. Basketball, however, is played on a relatively small playing-field and this creates more opportunities for players to make spectacular plays. Seeing how basketball is quite a fast-paced game, it is still common for commentators to make pauses whilst talking. This is more common with commentaries supported by the visual experience because they do not need to comment on every little detail happening. Radio commentators, however, usually try to avoid silence as much as possible.

1.2 Broadcasting mediums

1.2.1 Radio

Before the television became a regular household item, sport-enthusiasts would get their information about a game via radio. As the case is today, each major basketball game would have a radio host on the spot to dictate actions happening on the court. During the first decades of sports commentary through the radio, the commentators would have a small sketch of the field with numbered areas, people listening at homes would be able to re-create the sketch in order to follow the commentator's talk (Chrisholm, 2017: para. ³). This practise became obsolete quite fast as people realized it was unnecessary. As of today, radio broadcasts of the NBA are still active, however, most of them are exclusively available through the internet. In comparison, the main commentators of both television and radio broadcasts have very similar roles. In both cases, only the main commentator introduces the side-line reporter, is the only person to talk about play-to-play actions, while co-reporters add in slight remarks and almost always takes every other turn in the commentary (Bowcher, 2003: 473).

1.2.2 Television

While radio commentary focuses on key-elements happening on the playing-field, commentary on television is used to enhance the viewing experience and to feed the viewers with information that could explain a certain move or play. Television commentators are required to keep the game interesting even when there is nothing interesting happening on the playing-field. It is their job to inform and entertain their audiences by explaining obscure rulings or significant plays (Jordan, 2007: para. ⁴). On the other hand, announcerless broadcasts have aired and those games proved that the audience does not necessarily require someone to keep telling them about what is happening on the playing-field. On December 20, 1980, the National Football League of America gained respectable ratings for such an announcerless game but this type of broadcast of quickly discontinued due to network executives considering this move to be a one-time experience (Rubinstein, 2000: para. ¹⁵).

1.3 Tasks of announcers, commentators and side-line reporters

The three primary types of sports commentators are play-by-play announcers, side-line reporters and colour commentators/analyst. All commentators have a specific task which they are required to follow.

1.3.1 Play-by-play announcers

They are the ones who talk the most, their role is to provide a step by step description of what is happening on the playing-field. They usually work for a local radio station or a television network, many of them work for a specific team and travel along the country to announce every seasonal game (Gresham, 2019: para. ⁴). According to the Bureau of Labour Statistics (2018), becoming an announcer requires education, training and experience. Most public schools in the United States of America offer courses that deal with becoming an announcer. Becoming an announcer is no easy job. Their careers start at college, while earning a bachelor's degree related to communications, journalism or broadcasting. Announcers usually work for a local radio station or a network to gain experience and trust from the audience (Gresham, 2019: para. ⁶). One of the most important aspects of being a play-by-play announcer is to develop credibility with one's audience (Miller, 2018). Being an announcer does not mean that one only describes actions that are happening on the field, but their job is to make the viewing experience as entertaining as possible. Working at a local level means that an announcer must earn the trust of the local sports enthusiasts in order to gain more credibility to get better perks at their job. Working on a national level, however, requires the announcer to be broader and focus on both teams at hand. Being overly subjective towards one team will outrage the opposing team's fans, thus creating distrust in half of the viewers/listeners. Broadcasters are not a part of the team, even if they work for the team. The number one word for announcers to avoid is "we" (Miller, 2018). Play-by-play announcers should provide a clear description about what is happening on the field while providing interesting context and statistics that improve the viewing experience for the audience.

1.3.2 Colour commentators

Colour commentators, also known as colour analysts, have similar tasks to that of play-by-play announcers. However, colour commentators are present purely to give quick remarks about players, plays and in-depth statistics. While the play-by-play announcers do their job of describing events happening on the field, then colour commentators analyse every move, throw, block, rebound, steal, etc. Colour analysts are usually former players or coaches. Their career typically starts with an on-the-job training by the employer (Gresham, 2019: para. 7).

1.3.3 Side-line reporters

Side-line reporters work even closer to the action. Their job is to provide insight based on what they hear and learn from the players and coaches. They are also responsible for conducting interviews with players before, during and after the game. The role of a side-line reporter is nowadays considered unnecessary. They only have about a few minutes of air-time and their interviews typically do not provide entertaining nor necessary information (Craggs, 2012: para. 13). It is a requirement for being a side-line reporter is to be young (under the age of fifty) and attractive, thus why many of them are women (Gordon, 2014: para. 10).

2. Empirical study

2.1 Transcription of commentary

In order to analyse the linguistic features of the commentary and how it is used, transcriptions were made of four separate games. Due to a complete lack of a script, one had to be created. This was done by listening and writing down every word said, excluding side-line reporter's talk and interviews. Two transcripts were made of games that had taken place during the Eastern Conference Finals and another two from the Western Conference Finals.

The Eastern Conference Finals had a total of seven games, but only games 1 and 7 were chosen. The games were held in order to figure out which team would represent the East-Coast in the 2018 Playoff Finals. These games were chosen due to Boston Celtics winning the first game, which took place on the 13th of May 2018, and Cleveland Cavaliers winning the last game (the deciding match), which took place on the 28th of May, 2018.

The Western Conference Finals also had a total of 7 games, out of which games 1 and 2 were chosen. These games were obviously chosen for the same reasons as the Eastern Conference Finals games. The first game took place on the 15th of May 2018, and was dominated by the Golden State Warriors and the second game took place shortly after, on the 17th of May, 2018. However, during this match, the Houston Rockets had the upper hand.

As mentioned in the introduction, these games were chosen for two reasons: personal preference and to have transcripts of games where each team had won. All four transcripts of games were composed manually, and their purpose was to give insight about the linguistic features as well as provide an easier way to look at the statistical side of commentary (how often one commentator speaks or how much).

2.2 Differences and similarities between play-by-play announcers and colour commentators

As mentioned before, four separate games were taken under analysis for this research. Both games in the Eastern Conference Finals included announcers such as Mike Breen, Mark Jackson and Jeff Van Gundy and both games in the Western Conference Finals

included Marv Albert, Reggie Miller and Chris Webber. All six men have similar job descriptions, yet have their own methods of using CT. This part will look further into how these play-by-play announcers and colour commentators differ from one another. Since all six men are of American origin, this part will analyse the attitude each commentator has for his work and to see whether they support one team or the other.

2.2.1 Attitude to one's work

During the Eastern Conference Finals Mike Breen, Mark Jackson and Jeff Van Gundy worked together to commentate on, analyse and give detailed descriptions of two NBA games. Mike Breen had the role of being a play-by-play announcer, while Mark Jackson and Jeff Van Gundy were there as colour commentators, which means their role was to add to the CT of Mike Breen. All three gentlemen remained professional during these broadcasts, but it was easy to tell that the three men conversed as friends. They had fun, laughed a lot, made hilarious remarks about each other and made the experience of watching a basketball game feel homely. The same could be said about the Western team. Throughout both games Marv Albert, Reggie Miller and Chris Webber all enjoyed working with each other, they made comments about how lucky they feel having that type of job and generally feeling happiness to be able to be that close to the game.

2.2.2 Subjectivity and objectivity in commentary

Being objective about a basketball game is not necessarily a requirement but being overly subjective shows lack of professionalism. Both teams of commenters (Eastern and Western) portrayed professionalism during their broadcast of these games, however, the Eastern team proved to be more subjective towards one team.

Both the first and the last games between Cleveland Cavaliers and Boston Celtics took place at the Celtics' home court, the TD Garden. It is a common interpretation that a team has a bigger motivation of winning on their home court, thus forcing them to play better. The crowd, as usual, was against Cleveland Cavaliers, but it seemed as if the commentators were as well.

During the first match between the two teams on the Eastern Conference Finals, commentators should not have had any strong feelings towards either team, yet the Boston Celtics got immediate praise for making it to the semi-finals with such a young roster (their roster was mostly made up of less experienced players, also known as rookies). An example of such praise given to the Celtics team:

1) Mark Jackson: *He's playing for the **Boston Celtics**, you look up in the rafters, and **you will see greatness all throughout the rafters** and this guy is not a friend of bright lights, when it matters most, it does not matter what type of night he is having, he wants the most of basketball and **he is a star on his way of being a superstar**.*

In this example, we can see how the colour commentator Mark Jackson believes that the Boston Celtics team is clearly the better team by claiming how their rafter² has greatness all throughout.

The play-by-play announcer Mike Breen remains the most professional out of the three commentators, while Mark Jackson and Jeff Van Gundy go on to express how they feel that the Celtics are the better team, regardless of their younger, more inexperienced team. This can be seen throughout the first match between the two teams: whenever the Celtics score, the colour commentator would approve and give praise with a higher tone than compared to Cavaliers making the exact same play, but not getting as much recognition as the Celtics got. Another example of commentators showing their opinion:

² List of players

2) Jeff Van Gundy: *I don't know what I'm more surprised about, that Cleveland swept an outstanding Toronto team, or that they've gotten beaten as soundly as they have today. But to me, I've always thought that Boston is better, I just think they have more better players.*

Yet another clear example of subjectivity by colour commentator Jeff Van Gundy. Here he clearly expresses favourability towards the Boston Celtics team.

During the final confrontation between the two Eastern Conference teams, both teams had won and lost 3 games, meaning they were quite equal. However, the trend of praising the Celtics team was still quite persistent. Granted, the Cavaliers, seemingly having better players, had made so many mistakes and one would easily assume the Celtics to have better coordination and teamwork. On the other hand, a commentator's job is to be objective towards both teams and report about actions happening, not personal feelings towards one side or the other.

2.3 Analysis of linguistic features and structures

As mentioned before, basketball does not have its own definitive register, merely a combination of various other registers: mainly informal and neutral. Basketball commentary or sports commentary in general tries to connect with the audience in order to give them a better experience, thus trying to communicate with the viewers or listeners on a level which speaks to them. This section will also look at specific features of syntax and how commentators use the English language to convey commentary.

2.3.2 Tenses used in commentary

Verbs and phrasal verbs are the most commonly used features of sports commentary. The English language has three main tenses for verbs: past, present and future. English language does not technically have a future tense; however it does realize this tense by using auxiliary verb constructions (Quirk et al, 1985: 176). In order to know at what point in time an action takes place, a tense is given to a verb or a verb phrase. Due to the fact that a commentator's job is to report about actions happening on the field, this means that the dominating tense in CT is definitely the present. However, commentators do not only talk about present actions, but also rely on events and actions that have already happened, meaning the past tense is also used a lot. It is very rare for sports commentary to be added to a game which has already happened, most games have live commentary. The present tense would also be dominant in commentary given to a past game, however, instead of present simple being the dominant tense, present continuous and present perfect would be used more frequently.

Since the play-by-play announcer's role is to report on-going actions, he mostly uses the present continuous, while colour commentators give insight and add remarks which include a variation of all tenses. However, one interesting, yet weird aspect happens a lot during CT: using different tenses in a single sentence. During the final match between Cavaliers and Celtics:

1) Mike Breen: *Horford after game 6 said he'll be better on Sunday as he did face double teams and the first free-throw is good.*

“*Said*” is an indication of a past account and is quickly followed up with “*he'll be*” which is clearly a future tense. If there had been a short pause between “*said*” and “*he'll be*”, it would be understandable, however, the commentator smoothly switches between past and future tenses. This type of sentence is irregular, yet a common feature of CT.

2.3.3 Word order

Word order is an important part of commentary which gives us information about the subject (player), verb (action) and object (result). In CT, the word order can only be analysed by either listening to it or reading the transcript. Speed variation, loudness-quietness, intonation, stress, rhythm and pausing. Since CT is mainly comprised of neutral and informal registers, it does not follow standard sentence types and often uses sentences that start with a conjunction. A conjunction, usually, is used to connect to clauses, however, in CT the topic changes too quickly that commentators are forced to cut certain parts of speech in order to explain actions currently happening on the playing-field. During the Eastern Conference Finals broadcast, the announcers used “*and*” to start a sentence a total of 53 times, while the Western Conference used it 33 times. Some examples of sentences starting with the conjunction “*and*”:

- 1) Mike Breen: *Tatum... **And** Nance just picked up his third foul in three minutes.*
- 2) Reggie Miller: ***And** Mike D’Antoni is ticked off as well, you don’t need a little tweak or a turn-over from Harden or Gordon, P.J. Tucker, who has been great.*

Both examples show how “*and*” is being used to start a clause/sentence. These sentences usually occur when a commentator is talking about one topic but decides to change the topic suddenly.

For the announcer to discuss actions happening on the playing-field, it is logical to start the sentence with a noun (or a pronoun if the given player’s name has already been spoken moments before). Due to basketball being an extremely fast-paced game, commentators are often forced to change their topic of talk in order to convey newer information. With television commentary, viewers can see actions happening on the field with their own eyes and announcers simply add remarks about a given play by simply announcing the name or nickname of the play-maker.

Commentator’s talk uses active voice rather than passive during its broadcast. Commentators in the NBA have seats very close to the playing-field, which enables them to clearly see the player, thus making it easier to use an active voice rather than passive.

- 3) Mike Breen: ***Greg Monroe** throws it up and in.*
- 4) Marv Albert: ***Paul** honking it away from Durant, 8 on the shot clock*

5) Jeff Van Gundy: *Tristan Thompson let it bounce and neither he or James secured the ball.*

As seen from these examples, most commentators use active voice when speaking with the audience/viewers. CT usually starts with the play-maker, which is then followed by the actual play.

Furthermore, basketball games are mainly broadcast on television, meaning viewers can see actions themselves and do not necessarily require someone to comment on the actions but rather mention the subject of the action, the player.

2.3.4 Clause structure

A Clause is the second largest grammatical unit, next to a complete sentence, which can express a complete meaning. The typical classification of sentences divides into simple and compound sentences, where simple sentences contain just one clause and compound contain more than one (Quirk et al, 1985:297). In the case of basketball CT, clauses and sentences vary a lot, but can mainly be categorized as containing minor sentences and run-on sentences.

2.3.4.1 Minor sentences

Minor sentences contain only a word or a phrase that acts as a simple sentence, yet it lacks grammatical completeness and independence of a full sentence (Quirk et al, 1985: 357), however, it can still be interpreted to have a meaning. As mentioned in section 2.3.3, viewers can see actions happening on the field for themselves and do not necessarily require the commentator to spout out the entire sequence. This means that basketball's commentary has a lot of sentences which only include either the subject or verb.

1) Marv Albert: *Durant on the drive. Offensive foul!*

As we can see from this example, the play-by-play announcer, Marv Albert is conveying certain actions happening on the field, giving information and ending it with a minor sentence "*Offensive foul!*". In this case the minor sentence is only an object without

any subject or verb to follow or precede it. “*Durant on the drive*”, however, can also be viewed as a minor sentence due to its lack of object. These minor sentences are mainly comprised of either the names/nicknames of players, moves, call-outs, expressions and so on.

2.3.4.2 Run-on sentences

The run-on sentences can be seen as a faulty compound sentence. A compound sentence contains two or more main clauses which are joined by a coordination. Clauses linked together have an equal meaning and an equal grammatical value. Some common linkers or coordinators can either be: *and, or, but* (Quirk et al 1985: 467).

CT in basketball uses zero coordination heavily due to the game being extremely fast paced. An announcer has to constantly change their topic of talk and quickly, without a pause, start talking about a more interesting action happening on the field. This is something that can be seen during both Western and Eastern Conference Finals games:

- 1) Mike Breen: *Love spins, gets inside, shot, gets his own rebound, back up, calls a foul.*
- 2) Mark Jackson: *I get it, you gotta give credit, former coach of mine, love him to death, a hall of famer, look at the guards he put in sleeve in the last couple years: Terry Rozier, Donovan Mitchell, both incredible guards.*
- 3) Jeff Van Gundy: *Okay, unquestionably. And his name Semi, means like half, almost like no... of course, I'm all the way Ojeleye.*
- 4) Marv Albert: *Durant 7/10, fifteen points, here's Paul giving it up, Ariza off the fake, drives off Livingston and the ball is deflected out of bounds.*
- 5) Reggie Miller: *Sometimes that's all you need on the offensive cut, the big man coming in, cleaning off the glass after a long-distance haul.*
- 6) Chris Webber: *And that's twice, a one on one play by James Harden, Curry was able to get around them, blast the defence to fling it to Thompson for a wide-open shot.*

As the examples show, all commentators use run-on sentences and it is a common trait throughout CT in basketball. All examples show zero coordination, which is highly present in sports commentary of basketball. It is a quick way to talk about actions happening on the field, without properly linking each clause to each other.

2.3.4.3 Linguistic segmentation

The sentences in sports commentary are not structured properly due to a lack of linkers between clauses, this, in turn, creates segmentation of clauses (Stolcke 1996: 1006). Commentators do this quite often; turn speech into segmented units. The only way to distinguish one unit from another is to listen to the intonation as well as a rise and a fall in tone. Regular topics, which do not have interesting actions happening, are conveyed with a normal, lower tone. Some examples of linguistic segmentation in speech:

1) Mike Breen: *Morris ()³ 73% from the line during these playoffs () he's had a good game- a double double () misses the free-throw again. Morris is just an average free-throw shooter, he's hit 72%.*

2) Marv Albert: *Good defence on the side of the Rockets in this season () they're top 6 in the league. Shot clock down to 5 () to Iguodala from Durant, Iguodala fires () and yes.*

As seen from the examples, commentators try to avoid silence in games, even when there is nothing important to talk about, they stretch out sentences by using short pauses. On the other hand, whenever players decide to score in a manner which is uncommon, commentators have a sudden rise in tone which in turn stresses the importance of current actions. An example of such a change in tone:

3) Mike Breen: *Smart will try a three, ↑ TATUM WITH AN OFFENSIVE REBOUND⁴, Rozier to the bucket, ↑ LOCKED HAND OFF THE GLASS.*

4) Marv Albert: *Gordon for three, ↑ RIGHT BACK AT YOU.. unbelievable, having a terrific night. He's 4/6 from downtown and Steph Curry showing some sides here.*

³ A short pause between clauses to emphasize linguistic segmentation

⁴ A rise in tone.

Since play-by-play announcers do most of the talking, it is natural for them to produce segmentation more often. In order to understand when one unit of segmentation is over, a pause is introduced. These pauses usually last as long as a play is being made (e.g. a player is throwing the ball, but it is yet unclear whether it will go in the basket or not). Such pauses also build tension for the viewers due to excitement or disappointment depending on the result. This tension is usually positive in regards of creating relief whenever the sought-after result occurs. While it is impossible to physically connect the thrill of taking part in sports and the experience of viewing someone play it, commentators do a good job of creating a mental virtual between the two. Due to this tension, many viewers and listeners feel as they are part of the team and experience, albeit to a small degree, the same emotions (Muska, 2017: para. 6).

2.3.5 Modifiers

Modifiers, also known as adjuncts, can be a clause, word or a phrase which functions either as an adverb or an adjective to provide further information about a word or a word phrase or otherwise known as the head. Modifiers which precede the head are called premodifiers, and those which come after the head are called postmodifiers. Modifiers can either be a restrictive or non-restrictive, meaning they can either be essential to the head or simply additional, but not necessary. (Nordquist. 2018: para 3).

Modifiers are not just an essential part of basketball CT, but essential to most sports' commentary. Their main role in CT is to specify information about the noun or a pronoun, in this case the players.

1) Jeff Van Gundy: LeBron James has to guard somebody, *who is an aggressive, assertive and an offensive player*, whereas in the previous two series, they put him on guys, *who are not that aggressive offensively*.

In both cases a restrictive relative clause, which modifies the noun; “*somebody*” and “*guys*”

2) Mike Breen: Irving, last year, averaged almost 26 points per game and we see him sitting next to Daniel Tyce, *the rookie from Germany*.

In the case of basketball CT, modifiers provide valuable information to the viewer; mostly specific information about a certain player or players.

2.3.6 Dislocation

A Dislocation is a constituent, which appears outside the clause boundaries, either to its left or its right. A left dislocation, also known as a preface may precede both declarative and interrogative clauses (Biber et al. 1999: 957), thus it is always on the left side of the clause. Its role is to provide information which links the following clause to the subject. Unlike appositions, dislocations do not have two elements identifying each other. Some examples of sentences with a dislocation:

- 1) Jeff Van Gundy: *James, in the last couple minutes, has made spectacular plays.*
- 2) Mark Jackson: I will say this: **Cleveland Cavaliers**, they've made their defence, that's pretty good defence. If they play that way... Watch out.

Left dislocations precede the following sentence targeted at the dislocation. In both examples, left dislocations show either the player or the team under comparison.

A right dislocation, also known as a tag, occurs on the right side of the clause and is normally co-referent with the subject of the preceding clause as seen in the following example:

- 3) Mark Jackson: *They've done a tremendous job throughout this season, **the Celtics**.*
- 4) Chris Webber: *There's that isolation basketball you were talking about, **Marv**.*

As was the case with left dislocations, a tag is meant to give viewers an idea who or what the topic of talk was about

Left dislocations are more common in basketball commentary than tags. As mentioned in section 2.3.3, active voice is dominant in basketball's commentary due to the commentators seeing players up-close, enabling them to start their talk with the name of the player, instead of conveying actions while trying to figure out the player's name.

2.3.7 Use of informal language

As one would expect, the use of informal language is quite prominent in CT. It is an inevitable part of the register. Basketball being the fast-paced game that it is, certain phrases or words are pronounced in a simpler manner. The dominant examples are derivations of verbal phrases such as “*want to*”, “*going to*” and “*got to*”. All examples are shortened and are given an easier pronunciation correspondingly “*wanna*”, “*gonna*” and “*gotta*”.

1) Jeff Van Gundy: *And they don't have to double as much because they have both size and lateral quickness to match up against James. Not that you're gonna stop him but you're gonna make and take shots that you would rather see him take.*

2) Reggie Miller: *He's gotta make a quick decision here.*

Furthermore, when “*gonna*” is given the personal pronoun “*I*” it becomes “*imma*” as can be seen in the following example:

3) Jeff Van Gundy: *Imma tell you something, that play right there is not gonna have anything to do with who is gonna win this game. But it says everything about “Do you wanna win?”.*

All these attributes are not strictly linked to sports commentary alone but are found in most cases of informal speech.

2.3.8 Paralinguism in commentary

It is not a big surprise that paralinguage has a special spot in sports commentary. David Crystal (1998:430) believes that paralinguage is a direct reflection of emotions. Crystal also believes that sports casters have a difficult job of portraying sporting events in a way which makes the viewers want to keep watching and listening to the commentator's thoughts and opinions about the matter. To keep the game interesting, commentators use paralinguage to express their emotions toward the game.

2.3.8.1 Use of extra-linguistic features

It is apparent that non-verbal communication comes up quite often during CT and is fundamental in expressing one's emotions. These extra-linguistic features are yet another part of linguistic attributes that commentators use to emphasize their thoughts and opinions of a game. Basketball commentary, as it is today, cannot exist without extra-linguistic features, thus is an extremely important part of CT.

A broadcast of a basketball's game on television often does not even require commentary. Televised commentary is not necessarily mandatory but is an inseparable part of watching sports games. Due to viewers having an almost identical viewing experience as the commentators, many utterances can be left unsaid. This prompts the use of extra-linguistic attributes such as a scream, a laugh, a cry, etc. However, these extra-linguistic features often require some verbalization such as:

1) Mike Breen: *Whoa! (laughter) I did not expect that.*

In this case the commentator is amazed at a play and lets out a small chuckle to express his joy.

2) Reggie Miller: *↑YEAH, now that's what I'm talking about!*

Another example of extra-linguistic features commonly found in CT, the commentator screams positive emotions to convey his love for his job.

3. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to bring out certain syntactic features that commentators in the NBA use and how it defines the language of sports commentary and whether sports commentary can be classified as an individual register. The entire study was mainly focused on sports commentary used by basketball commentators in order to bring out its linguistic aspects as well as structures of sentences. The thesis first starts by explaining different aspects that sports commentary uses and the importance of said aspects. The study found that sports commentary during a basketball game is mainly comprised of a combination of the neutral and the informal register. Basketball's commentary relays information to the audience at a fast pace and does so in order to save time. This in turn creates a lot of sentences and clauses which do not have proper conjunctions, meaning sports commentary in basketball is mainly comprised of minor sentences and run-on sentences. The study also found that sports commentary often uses a lot of incomplete sentences that only contain either the subject, verb or object, but not all together. The register of basketball commentary is mainly made up of the verbalization of extra-linguistic features under the pressure of time.

Paralanguage is without a doubt an invaluable part of sports commentary. This thesis provides examples of paralinguistic features that commentators use and how it affects the overall quality of the commentary. Since commentators have to make the viewing experience interesting, they often use verbalizations of extra-linguistic features, which in turn create either positive or negative emotions whiting viewers.

The analytical part of this theses covered numerous features of syntax that are prominent in CT. Tense, word order, sentence structures, modifiers and dislocations are all important aspects of CT. Due to sports commentary typically being a live event, the present simple tense is extremely dominant in CT, however, it still includes the use of past tenses quite frequently. The word order in sports commentary is quite diverse, yet the subject is mainly used to start a sentence. This was apparent due to televised sports commentary not needing specific descriptions of events, but rather a distinction between players. Furthermore, this thesis covers different aspects of commentator types and how those types affect the commentary. It was found that play-by-play announcers are responsible for relaying a lot of information fast, this means that they do not have time to think about creating proper sentences and use minor and run-on sentences instead. Colour commentators,

on the other hand, are not required to convey each action and have time to think about what to say, since their job is to provide colour commentary (information about players, upcoming plays, history of players, etc). Unfortunately, evidence provided by this study will not be sufficient enough to declare an independent register for sports. In order to classify a register for sports language, further research is required of other fields of sports commentary.

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Resümee

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Karl Peterson

LINGUISTIC FEATURES AND SENTENCE STRUCTURES OF SPORTS COMMENTARY IN BASKETBALL

SPORDI KOMMENTEERIMISE LINGVISTILISED OMADUSED JA LAUSETE ÜLESEHITUS KORVPALLIS

Lehekülgede arv: 33

Käesolev uurimustöö fokuseeris spordi kommentaatorite keeleliste eripäradele kui ka lausete ülesehitustele. Uurimustöö eesmärgiks oli näidata, et keel, mida spordi kommentaatorid kasutavad, on omaette register. Kogu töö on tehtud Ameerika Ühendriikide korvpalli kommentaatorite näitel. Töö sisus kajastub erinevaid aspekte eripärase keelevariandi omadustest kui ka lausete ülesehitusest, mida enamasti kommentaatorid kasutavad. Uurimustöö teoreetilisel poolel on välja toodud lingvistilised omadused, nende selgitused ning kuidas need omadused on olemas kommentaatorite keeles. Töö teine pool arutab täpsemalt teoreetilises pooles välja toodud omadused koos näidete ja täpsemate selgitustega. Kuigi spordi kommentaatorid kasutavad oma keelt kajastamaks spordiüritust, ei piisa väljatoodud näidetest kinnitamaks, et spordi kommenteerimine vääraks veel oma registrit. Selleks, et kuulutada välja spordi kommentaatorite register, tuleks arvesse võtta erinevate spordialade varieeruvust kui ka iga spordiala kommentaatorite keele varieeruvust. Igal spordialal pole ühesugune viis kommenteerimaks sündmusi ning seetõttu tuleks uurida teiste spordialade kommentaatoreid.

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