

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
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**AN ANALYSIS OF LINGUISTIC FEATURES IN
AMERICAN FOOTBALL COMMENTARY**
BA thesis

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the linguistic features that are used within American football whilst also comparing how such characteristics have been used before. A total of nine transcripts were taken and analysed to see if gridiron football commentary has gone through any major changes or if it has not really changed much over the years.

The first part covers the language used in sports and their characteristics while also introducing the roles of the commentators and the differences between radio and television broadcasts that were used in the second part. Additionally, the first half of the paper takes a brief look at previous studies covering this topic. The second half of the paper compares several aspects, which were identified by previous studies and books on this topic.

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Introduction

Sports play a vital cultural and social role in society, engaging millions through participation and spectatorship while creating shared experiences and communal identities. The language of sports commentary serves as the crucial bridge between the technical aspects of games and general audiences, with commentators acting as cultural mediators who shape how viewers understand and discuss sports. Through their real-time narration and analysis, commentators create a specialised form of professional discourse that not only educates and entertains but also influences broader cultural communication as their terminology and metaphors enter everyday speech. Analysing this language therefore provides valuable insights into public communication, broadcasting evolution, and the ways specialised vocabulary develops and spreads through society. Sports language in particular is unique for every sport, and thus features different kinds of linguistic features. Features specific to sports commentary include real-time linguistic performance under pressure, as commentators must produce spontaneous yet coherent discourse while following rapidly unfolding events as well as distinctive syntactic patterns such as incomplete sentences.

American football, also known as gridiron football, is the most popular sport in the United States, and is considered “America’s sport” by over half of sports fans questioned in a survey (Gramlich: et al 2024 para. 2). Sport is a medium of entertainment for millions of fans, as weekly NFL broadcasts drew an average of 17,9 million viewers per regular season game this season (Gough 2024: para. 1). These games are broadcast by a plethora of TV networks such as CBS, NBC, ESPN, to name a few and even by some streaming service providers Amazon Prime Video and Paramount+. As most NFL games are shown

on Sundays, with over half of the games being played at the same time, and being shared by different networks, there are many commentary teams at work. This means that commentaries vary in terms of style, energy, presentation, depending on which commentators are working on a particular game, and giving the viewers some freedom to choose which broadcast they prefer to follow. As networks prefer to use their “best”, more popular commentators for the last game of the day, which is also on paper supposed to be the most intriguing match up, viewers can expect to have a familiar commentary team on duty. Alongside regular TV coverage, there are also radio broadcasts of the premier matchups of the day and every post season playoff game.

When comparing the jobs that different commentators have between different sports, gridiron football commentators seem to have a tougher task in front of them compared to some of their peers. An NFL roster consists of a minimum of 46 players, and has a limit of 53. Out of those athletes, about 30-40 see the field during a game, in order to manage the fatigue and minimise the injury risk of the more important players. Adding on to that the number of teams, which is 32, American football commentators have a lot more memorising and learning to do compared to their peers. Gridiron football as a sport is also unique in the amount of action that occurs during a game. A game consists of four 15-minute quarters, thus the in-game clock time is one hour but an average NFL game takes three hours and 12 minutes to complete (Rolfe 2023: para. 3), and on field action makes up about 18 minutes on average (Rolfe 2023: para. 7). In theory, this should mean that the commentators spend less time describing the action to the viewers compared to other sports, such as (association) football, where there is more constant action, which should indicate that they spend less time talking about what is happening on the field.

The aim of this thesis is to examine how the language has changed in American football commentary by analysing broadcasts from different decades, with particular focus

on identifying and understanding the key linguistic changes that have shaped how commentators describe and discuss the game. This thesis is focusing on the language of commentary teams of the final playoff game, which is also known as the Super Bowl. This study addresses an underexplored area in sports commentary analysis by focusing on American football, while also making a unique contribution through its historical comparative approach. Commentary styles vary based on multiple factors: such as the medium, the broadcaster's background and personality, the network's expectations, and the historical period. These variations provide valuable insights into how different commentators balance information delivery, entertainment, and audience engagement. Furthermore, studying stylistic differences across time periods and platforms helps identify broader trends in sports media communication, showing how commentary has adapted to changing audience expectations as well as technological capabilities. By analysing broadcasts from multiple eras, it provides insights into both the distinctive features of football commentary and the broader evolution of sports broadcasting language over time. In terms of other papers on similar topics, few have focused on this particular sport, as well as the lack of historical comparisons between commentaries. European football has seemed particularly popular in terms of analysis regarding the commentary, combined with the factor that most soccer commentators are British, there seemed to be a gap in looking at both American commentators and analysing their commentary of a different sport.

As the NFL has been around for a long time, it is also essential to get a historical perspective on the language of commentary, see if it has undergone any significant changes or has it been relatively consistent. The games range from the third ever Super Bowl played in 1969, all the way to 2015, and in total, it includes seven TV broadcasts and three radio broadcasts, which cover one of the seven games which were broadcast on television. The games were chosen based on their availability, to create a consistent gap between the

games, which was around seven years. This gap was chosen due to the scarcity of available broadcasts, with the combination of also trying to keep a similar interval between the game commentaries.

The first part of the thesis discusses the relevant literature associated with the language of sport, touching on linguistic features and structures used within a game of gridiron football. It will also define the register, explaining what commentators do and what the tasks of commentators are. A distinction between radio and television broadcasts will also be made, contrasting the differences between them.

The second half analyses the language of the commentators of several American football games from five different decades and looks into both the linguistic features of their speech. More specifically, the section will cover the vocabulary, such as the supplantation of terms and idioms as well as the sentence structuring and syntax of the sportscasters.

1. Language in sport

The language of sport is an intriguing and complex phenomenon that goes beyond the scope of conventional linguistic analysis. According to Beard (1996: 2–3), the various meanings associated with different sports add to the intricacy of the linguistic environment in this area. According to Beard, every sport has its own distinct set of cultural connotations, symbolic meanings, and social contexts that have a big impact on how language is used and perceived in the context of sports. Recognising the historical foundations is necessary to appreciate the complexity of the language used in sports. Over time, the language of sport has persisted as a rich source of specialised linguistic communication. In linguistic terms, the language of sport can be categorised into two main components (Taborek 2014: 238). Firstly, there are sports commentaries conducted by professional commentators, who communicate through various mediums such as

television, radio, modern media, or newspapers. These commentators play a crucial role in interpreting and narrating the events on the field. Secondly, there is communication on the field itself, involving interactions between referees, players, coaches, and other stakeholders. This dynamic linguistic exchange occurs within the game context and contributes significantly to the overall language of sport.

1.1. The register of sport language

Linguistic register is a form of language associated with a particular situational context and communicative intent (Biber & Conrad: 2009: 6). It's a collection of linguistic distinctions bound to social projects and/or socially project participants (Agha, 2005: 7). Yet, Ferguson (1983) advocates the concept that the only way to assess whether or not something is a register is to know project intentions. Therefore, every register has an intentionality, it has a membership, it has what's known and valued by that membership and the hierarchy that distinguishes it from other registers. Particularly observing from Ferguson (1983) that sports announcer talk (SAT), which describes the way language sports commentators communicate during a sports broadcast. Sport possesses attributes which distinguish it from other registers because it depends upon the game being played—the language stems from an external source and such fluidity of transitory status makes SAT above many registers. In addition, the enjoyment of SAT, in connection to the game and sociolinguistic expectations, significantly contributes to paralinguistic features like speed, stress, and sentiment of delivery, all of which are key distinguishing characteristics for SAT. Moreover, the registers are temporal as well. For example, what a commentator would say differs from what a fan yells in the stands. Since there is even generalised knowledge and ideology surrounding scoring, fouls, and the players/referees that play or call faults, it determines what is said, how it is said, and via what channel it is

communicated. For example, the referees and the players talk to each other using the specific lexicon of their craft. We deem these language-induced variances as distinguishing characteristics to compound the registers. Ultimately, SAT has its registers due to the game's pace and the need of society to get the excitement out while it's happening, rather than afterwards.

1.2.Characteristics of sports commentary

The language used by sports commentators has to be captivating and interesting to the listeners in order to attract their attention. Such speech has been observed by Bryant (Bryant et al. 1977), noting how the announcers actively try to make everything more dramatic. The characteristics of commentaries differ between different languages and countries, according to Woo et al. (2010), baseball commentators from the United States tended to focus on analysing game mechanics and technical aspects, such as the specific techniques employed by players. On the other hand, South Korean announcers did not particularly focus on that, and put a bigger focus on evaluating the performances of particular players as well as being more biased, frequently describing the play of a particular player as world class and being clearly in favour of one baseball team over the other. Another interesting finding when comparing the commentators from both countries was that the Americans rarely gave negative comments about the players, whilst it was a lot more common for the Korean commentary. Even though those findings were about baseball commentary, it is likely that this also applies to American football. Sports commentary uses a variety of registers and styles (Syaputri et al. 2024), and that is an important characteristic, as the announcers need to cater to all sorts of listeners with different interests, knowledge and backgrounds. The variance in the spectators or listeners makes it vital that the commentators do not stay one dimensional, and attempt to be engaging to as many people as possible.

The various syntactic characteristics of sports commentary are going to be further explained and examined in the next chapter of this thesis, focusing on the interpretations of Ferguson (1983).

1.3.Differences between broadcasting mediums

Radio broadcasts have had a long relationship with sports, and it has also played an important part in the popularisation and development of sports themselves around the world (Tandon: 2022). Even though television is now more widely available than it was before, people still tune in to the radio for their favourite sports broadcast, and Entercom, who own over 40 sports radio stations in the United States, have stated that they have 11 million listeners per week (Notte: 2018). Furthermore, since the expansion of the internet, many radio broadcasts are now widely available online (McGuire 2002: 51), letting people listen to their favourite sporting events from anywhere. All major American football games have official radio broadcasts alongside the television broadcasts, hosted by different radio stations. The fact that during different sports events listeners still want to tune into radio commentary if there is one, shows the importance of it (McGuire 2002: 60). An aspect of radio that makes it more engaging than television for instance is the emphasis on silence not being an option, whereas periods of silence are not uncommon in television commentaries (Kuiper et al 2013: 32).

Television has the potential to be more popular for viewers just for the fact that it can enhance the experience by actually showing the game happening itself, they can see what has happened for themselves. That also means that the commentators themselves have less to do than the radio commentators, as words sometimes cannot give across what the viewer had just seen themselves. Television commentators say less compared to radio broadcasters in general (Kuiper et al 2013: 40), as there is no need to explain things that

may seem obvious to the viewers, i.e., which team has possession of a ball or how much time is left in the game. Television announcers have the luxury of not having to constantly remind the listeners of such things. The commentators during television broadcasts also have access to some interesting technologies, which enable them to draw lines on the screen, in order to emphasise a strategy employed by a team or point out a player that may be in an interesting position.

1.4.Tasks of commentators

The term commentary can have multiple definitions depending on the context, and this paper is using Ferguson's (1983: 155) first approximation of sportscasting, it is "the oral reporting of an ongoing activity, combined with the provision of background information and interpretation". Another important part of the definition is the lack of feedback that the sportscaster receives live. A commentator conveys the action on the field to the audience, adjusting the level of detail based on whether the listeners can see the game or not. Radio sportscasters, in particular, must create a vivid mental image for their listeners to help them visualise the events unfolding on the field.

Furthermore, the commentators must ensure that there is a minimal amount of silence during a broadcast, which could be because of the aforementioned fact that the caster receives nothing from his unknown audience, as receiving feedback is an important part during an standard conversation, the other part is expected to respond (Ferguson 1983: 156).

Commentaries in sports can be grouped into two: the play-by-play announcer and a colour announcer, if there are not multiple people commentating, then the announcer takes the roles of both at once (Ferguson: 1983). Play-by-play commentators provide a real-time, chronological account of events, while colour commentators offer analysis, insights, and

expert commentary to enhance the audience's understanding and appreciation of the game. This dual structure allows for both immediate description of action and deeper analysis of game events, creating a comprehensive viewing experience for the audience.

The broadcast team may also include sideline reporters, who conduct interviews with players and coaches during the game, provide injury updates, and share contextual information. However, this role has faced recent scrutiny regarding both appearance-based hiring practices (Gordon: 2014) and the authenticity of reporting (Vrentas 2023: para. 1).

1.5.Previous studies

As the language of sports commentary is a fascinating topic, it has been covered multiple times before, including many different disciplines, ranging from the more commonly researched association football commentary to a bit less discussed sports such as ice hockey. A recent extensive paper (Syaputri et al: 2024) tackled the linguistic features of soccer, focusing on the commentary of the 2022 FIFA World Cup hosted in Qatar. It was a qualitative study which covered politeness techniques and gender-specific language used during the tournament by the sportscasters. The main finding seemed to contrast the notable differences in language between male and female sports commentators. While female commentators tend to use motivating and collaborative language, focusing on teamwork, strength, and unity to encourage player and fan engagement. On the other hand, male commentators often use competitive, authoritative language, emphasising personal behaviour, leadership, and strategic analysis to provide evaluative perspectives.

In terms of looking at the evolution of sports commentary, one paper (Watanabe et al :2013) observed how the Chinese state media covered the Olympic Games over three decades, while focusing on several topics such as collectivism and individualism as expressed by the Chinese sportscasters. This research underscored the evolving nature of Chinese sport commentary, which has adapted to both social changes within China and

broader global trends. In the case of collectivism and individualism the commentary shifted towards the latter, as previously the effort of the athletes was depicted as part of a collective effort but the more modern commentary clearly outlined the individual athletes skills and personalities, although still keeping the more traditional outlook.

More research was conducted by Lewandowski (2012), who examined the linguistic features of online sports commentary (OSC) in comparison to spoken (television) and written sports commentary. The findings reveal OSC as a hybrid register that shares characteristics with both forms while maintaining its own distinct features. It aligns with spoken commentary through its use of present simple verb forms, copula be deletion, and informal language conventions aimed at building audience relationships. However, its syntactic patterns more closely resemble written commentary, featuring well-formed coordinate sentences.

2.An analysis of linguistic features

This section of the paper takes a look at some of the characteristics that were noticed and compares how the usage has changed, in the case there are any differences.

2.1.Methodology

The research followed a qualitative approach and the methodology for analysing linguistic features in sports commentary involves examining the syntactic, lexical, and stylistic characteristics used by commentators in American football broadcasts. To begin, a relevant corpus was consisting of a of American football broadcasts, which consisted of 6 TV broadcasts and 3 radio programmes. The games were transcribed with the help of an online tool called DownSub, which extracted the closed captions from a YouTube video that were provided for the game, which were sorted and separated into lines with a python script to make it easier to read.

The full transcription of nine games was used in order to analyse the language present, including three radio broadcasts that were broadcast in parallel to the television broadcast during three of those games

The games chosen were based on multiple factors, the main one being availability; which ones have been uploaded by the NFL to their official YouTube channel. The second factor was the importance of the game, all of the games were Super Bowls, which is the final playoff game played at the end of every season. Furthermore, in order to see the evolution of the commentary, there was at least a seven-year period between the commentaries. The games chosen were played on January 12th, 1969 (Super Bowl III), January 9th, 1977 (Super Bowl XI), January 22nd 1984 (Super Bowl (XVIII)), January 27th 1991 (Super Bowl XXV), February 4th 2007 (Super Bowl XLI), and February 1st 2015 (XLIX), out of those six TV broadcasts, three radio broadcasts were also analysed, which covered the games in 1969, 1991 and 2007. These games offer a look into how these games used to be commentated and show the potential gradual changes that occurred in the commentary style of broadcasts between these years.

The sports announcers and reporters that worked on these games were Curt Gowdy (1969 and 1977), Al DeRogatis, Kyle Rote, Don Meredith, Pat Summerall, John Madden, Al Michaels (1991 and 2015), Frank Gifford, Dan Dierdorf, Lynn Swann, Jack Arute, Jim Nantz, Phil Simms, Steve Tasker, Solomon Wilcotts, Sam Ryan, Lesley Visser, Cris Collinsworth and Michele Tafoya. The following information will be provided in a table (see Table 1), in order to display the data in a more digestible way.

Table 1. Information regarding the collected data

Game	Year	Commentary team	Size of the corpus	Radio broadcast available
Super Bowl III	1969	TV: Curt Gowdy, Al DeRogatis and Kyle Rote Radio: Charlie Jones, George Ratterman and Pat Summerall	TV: 19860 words Radio: 31564 words	Yes
Super Bowl XI	1977	Curt Gowdy and Don Meredith	23162 words	No
Super Bowl XVIII	1984	Pat Summerall and John Madden	21586 words	No
Super Bowl XXV	1991	TV: Al Michaels, Frank Gifford, Dan Dierdorf, Lynn Swann and Jack Arute Radio: Jack Buck and Hank Stram	TV: 19074 words Radio: 29610 words	Yes
Super Bowl XLI	2007	TV: Jim Nantz, Phil Simms, Steve Tasker, Solomon Wilcotts, Sam Ryan and Lesley Visser Radio: Marv Albert, Boomer Esiason, John Dockery and Bonnie Bernstein	TV: 19580 words Radio: 29645 words	Yes
Super Bowl XLIX	2015	Al Michaels, Cris Collinsworth and Michele Tafoya	19435 words	No

2.2.Ellipsis

American football features frequent breaks between plays, with the clock still running. Furthermore, although a gridiron football game lasts an hour on paper, divided into four 15-minute quarters, the average NFL play lasts only about four seconds (Seward 2013: para. 5). As a result, the amount of ellipsis in commentaries is expected to be lower compared to other sports, considering that during most of a broadcast, little action is taking place on the field. In the following examples, the omitted part of the sentence is placed between brackets. Below are examples of ellipsis in several of the games:

- 1) *He's to the 10 [yard line], 15 [yard line] and over to the 20 [yard line].* (Super Bowl III)

In this example, the commentator has omitted *yard line* from the description of events, the actual play being a player crossing the marked 10, 15, and 20 yard lines on the field respectively, indicating how far the player has travelled with the ball. It makes sense to not mention the line itself, as the painted line is visible to the spectators. This also shows that ellipsis is more likely to occur in action, usually by the play-by-play commentator.

- 2) [The pass is] *Complete to Reed.* (Super Bowl XXV)

In this example, the commentator is reporting that the pass was successfully caught by Reed, and the omission does not hinder understanding because viewers can infer that the commentator is referring to the completed pass. This ellipsis helps maintain the

fast-paced nature of live commentary. In the last example (3), once again, the description of the action is omitted, keeping the narration concise and fluid.

3) *Brady fires* [the ball]. [The ball is] *Caught*. (Super Bowl XLIX)

This characteristic is influenced by the fast pace of the game, which necessitates a more streamlined commentary to cover all plays without leaving any action. In the 1969 game, for example, the yard-line was often omitted after the number, as seen in example (1). This type of ellipsis was more prevalent in earlier broadcasts, especially when numbers were involved, such as the yard lines. In contrast, radio broadcasts tend to use ellipsis less frequently. For instance, the radio transcript of the third Super Bowl includes minimal usage of ellipsis. Ellipsis in sports commentary serves multiple purposes: it ensures that the commentary keeps pace with the fast action of the game, avoids redundancy, and maintains an engaging, efficient style of communication.

2.3. Word order

Subject-dependent inversion refers to the action of swapping the positions of the main clause's subject and a dependent element, typically a complement of the copula, within the verb phrase (Huddleston et al 2002: 1385). Inversion is a useful tool, especially to be used in order to allow the commentator to realise, identify what is going on, for instance, which player is in possession of the ball, as the TV viewers may not be familiar with what number the players wear (Green 1980: 584). This leads to situations where the sports announcers first say the play that they have just seen, and after that point out the player or players that were involved in that particular situation. Inversion in sports commentary is more often than not used as a stylistic device employed to create emphasis or dramatic effect by altering the typical word order in a sentence. This example (5) seems

to use inversion because the commentator was not sure as to who behind the player is, inverting the sentence to give themselves time to name them.

- 4) *Second down and 9. Tom Matte could throw a pass. Back to Morrall. All alone is Jimmy Orr!*(Super Bowl III)

In addition to inversion, the word order is more often modified by the usage of passive constructions by sports announcers. This linguistic choice not only enhances the clarity and flow of the commentary but also contributes to maintaining a sense of neutrality and objectivity.

These examples (5, 6, 7) emphasise the plays made, and are also possibly used to first describe the action and then identify the player. American football is unique also due to the equipment worn by the players, and their distinguishable features are often their physical features, such as height and build or their number. This would explain why passive constructions are so important in this sport in particular.

- 5) *And it's picked off at the 42-yard line by Bobby Wagner!* (Super Bowl XLIX)
- 6) *It's caught by Stephen Baker* (Super Bowl XXV)
- 7) *And he's hit down there by Rademacher, number 23, (...)* (Super Bowl III)

2.4.Heavy modifiers

Modifiers are used in order to provide more information to the viewers, for example when the commentators mention a name, they tend to also specify which position that player primarily plays or information about their characteristics, their recent form.

- 8) *Art Monk, the other wide receiver, has yet to catch a pass.* (Super Bowl XXV)
- 9) *“And tripped up at the 30-yard line by Steve Tasker, who is going to the pro bowl as a special teamer* (Super Bowl III)
- 10) *There's Gary Reasons, who had the big run in their win over the 49ers.* (Super Bowl XLIX)

Such modifiers seem to be more common in the Super Bowl, which could have been caused by the fact that many viewers do not keep up with the NFL regular season, as the Super Bowl viewership is about 10 times larger compared to the average regular season game (Stoll: 2024), and the announcers have the task to give as much context to them as possible, to bring everyone up to speed. However, modifiers are used often in less important games as well, showing that it is a common feature of the language of sport (Ferguson: 1983), and a great tool to use to emphasise the strengths, weaknesses of a particular player or just to bring everyone up to speed to context that can be useful to the followers of the sport.

There seems to be a lot more modifiers used in the earliest game analysed, which was played in 1969. Most players, when first mentioned, have their number and position mentioned by the announcer. Using player numbers as modifiers is the least prevalent in radio broadcasts, likely because the player numbers are mentioned by the announcers to help the viewers to identify the players on the field but as the listeners of radio broadcasts tend to not have a visual on the game itself, the numbers are deemed to not be as necessary as they are during TV broadcasts.

2.5.Result expressions

In his analysis of sports commentary across different sports, Ferguson (1983) identified a distinctive linguistic pattern where commentators use *for + noun* and *to + verb* constructions to indicate outcomes rather than purposes, which differs from their conventional grammatical function. He had suggested that this feature may have been used to save energy while commentating. This linguistic pattern shows how sports commentary has developed its own specialised grammar where conventional purpose markers have evolved to express results instead.

Examples (12) and (13) highlight the usage of the *for* + noun construction, which was frequently used throughout all decades, and can be considered a standard feature of American football commentary. These instances highlight how and when such result expressions are used: expressing the result of a play that had just finished, and often also indicates that the activity has stopped, at least for a certain amount of time. In the case of (12), the fair catch caused a stoppage of play. Similarly, the example (13) stopped the ongoing play but by contrast the play will resume much faster, as the on field personnel rarely gets switched out during that action, while the fair catch in example (12) very often results in the entire team being substituted out.

*11) And a typical Ray Guy punt, as Giaquinto signals **for a fair catch** and makes it at the 15. (Super Bowl XVIII)*

*12) Madison made the tackle, and it depends on the spot as to whether it's enough **for a first down**. (Super Bowl XLII)*

Sports broadcasters need to speak clearly and quickly. They often use short, direct phrases to tell viewers what just happened in the game. This helps in many situations - like announcing a touchdown, describing how far a player ran, or talking about what the defense might do next. These quick summaries are especially helpful for viewers who might have missed something. Broadcasters try to describe similar events in different ways to keep their commentary interesting and avoid sounding repetitive.

Result expressions were consistently used over the years and was seen in all games analysed, indicating that it is a prominent feature of the commentary language of American football, alongside other sports. As is expected, this feature is most extensively used in radio broadcasts, likely due to the lack of a visual aid for the viewers, and it seems that this

is the most effective way to convey the action that had just happened on the field for the sports announcers.

2.6. Supplantation of terms

Over the course of time, language changes for different reasons, the word may go out of fashion or perhaps a better word is found that describes a specific phenomenon better. Many cases of such supplantation were seen when analysing American football games. One such term is known as a *red dog*, which was widely used in the earliest game, played in 1969. It was exclusively used by the commentator Al DeRogatis, and was not used at all in the radio broadcast of the same game. In addition to *red dog*, which described a player being sent out for a rush, the term *blitz*, which has also retained the same meaning, was also used in Super Bowl III, and that is the term that has remained in usage to this day, as *red dog* had lost popularity. Both terms carry a very similar meaning, describing a tactic of rushing at the opposing quarterback instantly with multiple defensive players. The decline in usage of the term *red dog* in American football commentary is likely a combination of evolving terminology alongside changes in defensive strategies. Simplification seems to be the most likely explanation for the change of meaning of the term, as *blitz* might say a lot more to a casual viewer compared to more abstract terms.

Another notable example of supplantation is the verb *to dump*, which is defined as tackling the opposing quarterback before he can attempt throwing a pass. It was widely used in the games played in 1969 and 1977 but only the latter also featured the modern term *to sack* alongside *to dump*. The *sack* was coined by the NFL player David Jones in the 1960s, and he said that “Sacking a quarterback is just like you devastate a city or you cream a multitude of people. I mean it’s just like you put all the offensive players in one bag and I just take a baseball bat and beat on the bag” (CNN: para. 5). It caught on and gained popularity, and is still the widely accepted term to describe that phenomenon, as

comparing the devastation of sacking a city to the tackling of a quarterback is fitting because that is the most important position in football.

The final supplantation is the shift from using the verb *to boot* to the usage of the verb *to kick*. Both are accurate at describing the phenomenon of hitting a football with the foot. As was the case with the other two terms discussed, both were used interchangeably in Super Bowl III but as time went on, *booting* went out of fashion. *Kicking* can be considered a more general and versatile term that can be used in various contexts beyond sports but the words themselves are quite similar. It seems that the term *booting* has become more commonly associated with the term used in computing, which uses the same word to describe the process of starting up a computer.

2.7. Idioms

Gridiron football features a significant number of idioms that have been used throughout the years. As many other sports, it has also contributed to every-day languages with idioms that originated from the game itself, and the sports announcers use such lexical features throughout all games that were analysed. Idioms in American football often mirror the game's intensity, strategy, and physicality, becoming metaphors for life's challenges and triumphs. The idiom *hail mary* is used to describe a desperation play, symbolising bold, last-ditch efforts in various contexts. This idiom is quite rare, as such plays are only used when the game is close and there is almost no time left, and the usage depends on the kind of game and not the commentator's language. As the term only reached widespread usage after 1975, when Roger Staubach used *hail mary* to describe such a pass (Pro Football Hall of Fame 2000), meaning it was not used in the earliest game played in 1969. Otherwise, even though the idiom is not used often, every commentator would most likely use this term to describe such a play.

18) *I think a Hail Mary is in order right here, Mark what would you think?* (Super Bowl XLI)

The example (19) features another prominent idiom. The term *move the chains* is used to signify progress or advancement, akin to gaining yards for a first down. The term originates from the chain crew, who use poles connected with chains to indicate whether the team has gained a first down. This idiom was used in the 1991 game, and has stayed as a common term to this day, as commentators nowadays use it often to describe the offensive team moving forward. It was especially popular for radio broadcasters to use as another way to describe the team advancing the ball. This idiom will likely stay prominent as long as the NFL still uses physical chains to determine forward progress of the offensive team.

19) *Odomes makes the tackle, and they'll **move the chains*** (Super Bowl XXVIII)

2.8. Discussion

Overall, the development of the commentaries in American football has gone along various paths, and at the same time, several features have remained surprisingly constant across generations. Some linguistic features have changed substantially, while some other aspects have remained almost identical, thus reflecting both developments in the sport of American football itself and more general linguistic trends.

One of the obvious changes is in the terms used. For example, a term like red dog was changed to blitz, while to dump is normally replaced by to sack. Most of these changes have usually involved finding easier-sounding, more economical terms, or the natural growth of terms to better fit the sport and its strategies. A decline in the use of some of these older terms suggests a trend toward simplifying language to make it more accessible, especially to casual viewers who may not be familiar with the game's technicalities.

Ellipsis, a feature of rapid commentary, has remained a central tool in both radio and TV broadcasts but seems to be more common in earlier games, particularly for descriptions of player movements and field positions. On the other hand, modern-day broadcasts tend to depend more on direct expression, possibly due to the increased expectation for clarity and engagement in the viewing experience.

Another aspect in which modifiers have become more frequent, especially in Super Bowl broadcasts, is additional comments regarding players by commentators, naming positions or recent performances. This could be a reflection of the broader audience that watches such high-profile games, many of whom might be less familiar with either the sport or the players involved. Nevertheless, this trend of adding context is not exclusive to major games; modifiers are still on display in regular broadcasts.

Besides, the idioms have remained intact: *Hail Mary* and *move the chains* remain the same. They all reflect the high level of involvement in the game and strategy thereof—the people love them, and they're part of their shared vocabulary with the sport of American football.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to study how the language used in American football commentary has changed over time. The research identifies distinct differences between radio and television broadcasting styles. Radio requires more detailed descriptions and constant commentary, as silence is not an option. Television, by contrast, allows for moments of silence and relies heavily on visual elements to convey information. The commentary structure typically involves two main roles: play-by-play and color commentators, each serving distinct functions in the broadcast.

Cultural and linguistic elements play a significant role in commentary style. American commentators characteristically focus on technical aspects and game mechanics while generally avoiding negative comments about players. Commentary styles vary based on several factors, including the broadcast medium, broadcaster's background, network expectations, and historical period.

The research analyses nine TV broadcasts and three radio broadcasts of Super Bowl games, spaced approximately seven years apart. This study addresses a gap in research regarding American football commentary analysis, examining both vocabulary changes and syntactic structures over time. The work represents a thorough investigation of how sports commentary has evolved while maintaining certain core characteristics essential to effective broadcasting.

By looking at broadcasts from different decades, this thesis examined how commentators describe the game and how their style has evolved to keep up with changes in the sport, broadcasting, and audience expectations. The examination of American football commentary across different decades reveals both consistency and evolution in broadcasting language. While certain fundamental linguistic features have remained constant - such as the use of ellipsis for efficiency and result expressions for clear communication.

The analysis shows that some of the most significant changes occurred in vocabulary, with terms like *red dog* giving way to *blitz* and *boot* being replaced by *kick* reflecting a broader trend toward more accessible terminology. This shift suggests an adaptation to reach wider audiences while maintaining the technical accuracy needed for the sport's dedicated followers.

Radio and television broadcasts have developed distinct linguistic patterns, with radio commentators using more detailed descriptions and fewer elliptical constructions,

highlighting how the medium shapes the language. Television commentators, by contrast, have evolved to work in concert with visual elements, leading to more concise and complementary commentary styles.

The persistence of certain linguistic features - particularly the use of heavy modifiers, result expressions, and specialised idioms - demonstrates the enduring needs of sports broadcasting: to inform, engage, and contextualise the game for viewers. However, the way these features are employed has become more refined and audience-aware over time.

In terms of further research, it would definitely benefit from incorporating a larger number of games, especially including non-Super Bowl games. Considering the difference the commentary language makes in the commentary itself, it would also be interesting to compare how different languages would cover the same game. Additionally, it may be too early to research the differences between earlier and modern sports commentary, as it seems that they have not changed that significantly, at least according to the findings of this thesis, which may also explain the lack of such papers.

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Resümee

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Anton Belous

An analysis of linguistic features of American football

Ameerika jalgpalli kommenteerimise keeleliste omaduste analüüs

Bakalaureusetöö

2025

Lehekülgede arv: 32

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Käesolev uurimistöö uuris Ameerika jalgpalli Super Bowli mängude kommentaatorite keelt ja kommentaaride keelelisi aspekte. Uurimistöö eesmärk oli välja selgitada, kuidas Ameerika jalgpalli kommentaatorite keel on muutunud võrreldes erinevatel aastatel toimunud finaalmängude transkriptsioonides esinevaid keelelisi tunnuseid.

Töö esimene pool tutvustab spordi kommenteerimise keelt ja toob välja selle keeleliigi tunnuseid. Samuti uuritakse, mis erinevused on raadio ja televisiooni ülekannete kommenteerimisel ning mille poolest erinevad kommentaatorite tööülesanded. Viimaks teeb töö ka ülevaate sellest, et mida on leidnud varasemad uuringud.

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Märksõnad: sport, kommenteerimine, ameerika jalgpall

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