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“Upff, yellow card, surely”

English football fans watching the World Cup on TV

When fans watch football on television, they profile themselves as experts in the field of football. Concentrating on the linguistic side of this construction of identity, a number of verbal practices emerge.

One is the signalling of expertise to the other fans present by commenting on the game. Expertise is based on knowledge which is independent of the immediate context. Football as a rule-based activity is constituted by a binary choice: either fair game or foul play. This status is continuously assigned by the referee and his linesmen. Their decisions (or non-decisions) invite comments by the audiences, both the (professional) commentators on TV and the fans at home. These comments presuppose independent knowledge and thus expertise. If a comment by one of the fans at home is ratified either by the others present or by the television, i.e. by the game itself or the journalists, the identity of an expert has been successfully negotiated by one of the fans.

The most striking practice is how the football fans manage to carefully construct their talk around the commentators’ discourse so that one single, coherent conversation emerges. This strategy is grounded on the conversational style in British commentary. A commentator and a pundit talk to each other on television which allows for the interlacing with the conversations of the fans at home. Classical German commentary with just one commentator “neutrally” describing the game does not seem to invite similar co-constructions of talk.

The English football fans can be interpreted as a ‘community of practice’ i.e. “an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavour.” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992: 464) Linguistically, the fans show that they are part of the community of practice, which “does watching football on TV,” by applying these practices. The practices can only be learnt in having spent countless hours watching football on television. They display the fans’ knowledge of football and of “footballese”, the discourse appropriate in this setting.

The analysis is based on recordings of groups of English families and friends with non-immigrant background, who are watching the World Cup 2002 Japan/Korea on television. Their conversations and the talk and events on television were transcribed to allow for a close reading.