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The sociolinguistics of football

On the one hand, football is a simple rule-based ball game. On the other hand, it is also a world-wide socio-economic phenomenon cutting across continents, cultures, and languages. Thus, football captures the attention of scholars from various disciplines within the humanities (for linguistics cf. Lavric et al.). Sport historians have shown the immediate connection between the development of sport and the city: “The underlying dynamic behind the emergence of spectator sports was urbanization” (Jhally 1984:43). The proposed panel on the sociolinguistics of football embraces not only topics directly related to the main conference theme of urbanity, but also many classic themes in sociolinguistics (e.g. class, gender, ethnicity, language and the media). Considering the wealth of sociological literature on football (Giulianotti 1999) and the range of topics involved (e.g. politics, economics, media, nationalism, racism, globalization, fan cultures, social identity), it seems surprising that this domain has not been investigated in any depth in sociolinguistics.

In keeping with the conference theme “Language and the city”, the panel will explore inner-city rivalries, different linguistic practices demarcating the territories of local rivals: this may include rituals at local derbies, linguistic practices in the stands (cheering, singing, use of profanities...) and the many other modes in which the fans’ group identities are indexed (Baderman in Stockwell 2001:36-38). Also, talk-in-interaction, e.g. Monday mornings in offices, factories, and schools, when the latest football results are discussed and affiliations re-enacted, are part of the sociolinguistics of football. The panel will also be interested in comparative work: urban fan cultures, tribes, social networks or communities of practice across continents, languages, and cultures.

Moreover, football is a rich site for classic fields of sociolinguistic research such as class, gender and ethnicity. For instance, the “myth of 1966”, England’s only World Cup win (against Germany) has been described as having at its bottom “nostalgic nationalism, an unequivocal masculinity and a submerged reference to class” (Critcher 1994: 86). Also, the apparent paradox between ticket prices and merchandising on the one hand and the working class image of football on the other hand can be approached from a linguistics perspective. The as a rule gendered nature of sports in surfaces in many discourses about football (e.g. Meân 2001). This year’s FIFA Women’s World Cup in Germany provided a wealth of topics in this respect. Furthermore, ethnicity and also racism are a common topic in scholarly research on football (e.g. Leite Lopez 2000) which merit attention in sociolinguistics.

Finally, language and the media, a field of long standing at the Sociolinguistics Symposium, will also be in focus. The FIFA World Cup is the biggest media event in terms of worldwide coverage, bigger than the Olympics. Modern association football cannot be envisioned without the spread of mass media. There is a plethora of mutual influences of interest to sociolinguistics: on a micro level, for instance, the connection between the game on the pitch and its linguistic representations in the form of sports announcer talk, newspaper reports, live internet clockwatches... and their various registers and styles. On a macro level, the connection between politics and football (e.g. when it comes to pairings such as Argentina versus England) can be analysed through mass media discourse. Finally, the panel will also take into account the behavior of fans watching football on television, whether in a pub with friends or at home with the family (Gerhardt 2009).

The session will be opened with a general introduction to previous work on this topic, both in linguistics and neighboring fields.

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