

STUDIES IN PHYSICAL CULTURE AND TOURISM
Vol. 16, No. 1, 2009

JÜRGEN BUSCHMANN, MATHIAS BELLINGHAUSEN
Deutsche Sporthochschule, Olympischen Studien Zentrum, Köln, Germany

SPORT AND LANGUAGE IN GERMANY

Key words: German sport language, sport reporting, anglicisms, language of football, language change.

ABSTRACT

The article discusses the language of sport in Germany from a structural and cultural perspective. The most productive field of language change is the language of football – Germany’s sport number one. The authors present different mechanisms of change of sport language: borrowings (mainly anglicisms and hispanisms), derivation, translation as well as various tendencies in present-day sport reporting. Sport understood as a means of communication is becoming more and more important in Germany as an integrating component of a heterogeneous society.

In Germany sport is a genuine sub-area of social structure and a fixed part of human life and culture. For this reason, German sport journalists, authors, philosophers, cultural scientists, language aesthetes, linguists as well as literary and social critics are opening their eyes more and more to the mental images and discourses originating in sport. “As a fast-moving means of communication, sport language is an ideal field in which to observe language change, as well as the forming of metaphors, new words and neologisms” [2]. It is not easy to obtain a differentiated overview of sports language as a object of interest of language researchers or sports scientists, however. Rather, sport is still the subject of sociological studies (of fan cultures, for example) in the context of socio-cultural or general social aspects. More comprehensive, on the other hand, are studies of the influence of neologisms – in particular anglicisms or hispanisms – in the German (sports) language, and those focusing on comparisons of different sports languages in the world.

In Germany, the study of different dialects can be traced back to the *German Dictionary*

written by the brothers Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm, who at the beginning of the 19th century – long before Germany’s formation as a unified state – identified numerous German dialects and collected common terms in a dictionary and a grammar book (started in 1838 and finished in 1960). Yet, even today, the German language features numerous regional dialects, the use of which is also shaped by socio-economic or educational influences, making it a subject of linguistic and sociological research.

While expressions and terms from older sports have been well integrated in popular language use, e.g. “to take a hard line with someone” or “to put the cart before the horse” taken from equestrian sports with their military roots, modern sports terms usually originate from English-speaking countries or from internationally binding sports regulations [2]. The diffusion of words and sayings in everyday use outside sport usually goes hand in hand with the popularity of the particular sport involved. When considering the variety of sports in Germany, a linguistic “insider-outsider” situation can be quickly observed in the use of specialist terms from sports that are not very

popular, e.g. fencing or figure skating techniques. Even if they do briefly capture the general public imagination during the Olympic Games, which alongside the Football World Cup and European Championships receive most coverage in the German media, they return to their specialist niche for another four years as soon as the event is over. The problems related to Germanization of specialist terminology or sometimes also slang sport-related terms from other languages was clearly demonstrated by a discussion about basketball. When German TV sports channels Premiere and DSF – German Sports TV broadcast NBA matches, German commentator Frank Buschmann – a recognised expert on both basketball and the NBA – translated common American terms literally. Yet, the use of the term *brick* to describe a miss, or the expression *it's like money in the bank* to describe a perfect shot, provoked a discussion about the way American sports are reported on. The German viewers were not able to understand the meaning of these expressions, though the discussion was hardly noted outside the world of basketball fans.

German reporting on even more modern sports such as American football, or less popular “classic” sports features the ongoing explanation of rules and tactics as well as specialist vocabulary in the commentary (for example, equestrian expert Carsten Sostmeier’s reporting from the Olympic Games involving explanation of the finest distinctions in jumping techniques or horse anatomy). Quite often parallels are drawn to some more popular sports in order to help viewers understand better reporting on some less known sport.¹

The situation is different with terms and neologisms related to football – Germany’s sport number one. Terms such as *keeper*, *coach*, *kick*, *penalty* or *referee* are used quite naturally in a football context, although German has its own names for these. The same is true for the English

descriptions of tactical behaviour such as *kick and rush*, *power play* or *fore-checking*. In the case of some Germanised (football) terms, their etymological origin has been obliterated completely. The German word *Kantersieg*, for example, is used for a clear, easily achieved final result in a team sport. There are very few people who know that this word comes from the English word *canter* (light gallop, as a short form of *Canterbury gallop*).

The football anglicisms are, however, usually well understood outside the world of football as well. Thus in 2006, for example, when the football World Cup was held in Germany, no less than three football-related terms were included in the Word of the Year² list published by the *Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache* (The German Language Society) in Wiesbaden. The Word of the Year was *Fanmeile* (fan mile). The other two in the top ten were *Klinsmänner* (to describe the World Cup team coached then by Jürgen Klinsmann) and *schwarz-rot-geil* (describing the outstanding and newly-identifying euphoria in Germany triggered by the World Cup, and the colours of the German flag – *schwarz*, *rot*, *gold*, i.e. black, red, gold – coined by the Bild newspaper). With the term *FC Deutschland 06* and the wordplay *Herakles* referring to German coach of Greece’s national team Otto Rehhagel, football terms were also included in the 2004 and 2005 lists, respectively. The only sporting term to make the list in 2007 was *Dopingbeichte* (doping confession), which is mainly related to cycling rather than football. In the opposite vote for the “Unword of the Year”, there has never been a single term from the world of sport.

The influence of cultural characteristics of individual countries is also reflected more in football than in other sports. The Brazilians are attested a creative, highly developed and attractive playing technique, so that changing a name in Germany by adding the ending *-inho* or *-aldo* (analogous with the Brazilian names Ronaldinho and Ronaldo) is understood immediately. After Miroslav Klose had scored two goals for SV Werder Bremen against Arminia Bielefeld, Franz

¹ The German channel ARD introduces its explanation of the game of “hockey” as follows: “Hockey is quite similar to the much more popular game of football. As in football, a hockey team is made up of eleven players, but penalties are taken from seven metres away rather than eleven, and the ‘most popular’ football rule, the ‘offside rule’, was abolished for hockey after the Olympics in 1996 in Atlanta [...]”, <http://peking.ard.de/peking2008/sportarten/hockey/regeln/index.html>. Access on 2 September 2008.

² Words and expressions which have had a special influence on public debate over the past year, stand for important subjects or appear characteristic for other reasons are chosen (‘verbal guiding fossils’ of a year). This is not a matter of word frequency. The selection does not reflect any kind of evaluation or recommendation. www.gfds.de, accessed on September 1, 2008.

Beckenbauer called him *Klosinho* – without any further explanation being necessary. The rival Hertha BSC Berlin has given its official mascot the name “Hertinho”. The term *laola*, sometimes with a suffix as in *Laola-Welle* (*laola wave*) is also used in German [1], for example, DSF has given the name “Laola” to its TV programme featuring international football reports.

The most extensive comparative analysis of sports reporting in the French and German language of the football World Cup in France in 1998 was carried out by Müller [6], who studied 1,500 press articles and around 30 hours of TV coverage concerning the cultural perception of each other by the German and the French. He observed that alongside the diametrical opposition between refusal and fascination, there were also coherent and stable generalizing statements and images of how the Germans and the French saw each other, as well as discussions related to regional studies. German discipline, diligence, industriousness and will, which led to success through efficiency despite lack of creativity and airiness, were in stark contrast to the French style of beauty, effortlessness, elegance, creativity and playfulness. These observations concerned general perception and sports reporting. It is striking that in the French press reports, only 51 German words and expressions were used, whereas 285 French terms were used in the German press [6]. Interestingly, in the “Nivel case”, when German hooligans attacked a French policeman, leaving him in a coma and seriously disabled, it was found that there was hardly any generalizing comparisons between German hooligans and “Nazi Germany” in the French press [6].

A differentiated consideration of the war-related characterisation of Germans was also found in the international press following the German national team’s 8:0 win over Saudi Arabia in their opening game at the 2002 World Cup in South Korea. Whereas newspapers in the neighboring European countries focused more on the historical result and the hat-trick scorer Miroslav Klose, the headlines of the Far East newspapers contained clear references to Germany’s war history: “Air bomb hat-trick” (*Tokyo Chunichi*, Japan), “Sappora experienced a Blitzkrieg” (*Yomiuri*, Japan), or “The

German Tanks Have Not Got Rusty” (*Dong-A Ilbo*, South Korea)³.

German reporting has been always characterised by striving towards objectivity and (self-) critical analysis. Whereas Spanish or South-American TV commentators cry a long drawn-out *Gooooaaal!!!* that lasts as long as they have breath in their lungs, more emotionality in German reporting is a phenomenon that goes hand in hand with the increase in private TV channels. This can still be seen best through a kind of dismay. Since linguistic attempts at an explanation assume that there are no concrete systematic means of language such as grammatical structures, wording rules or morphemes that can be used to clearly communicate specific emotions, Fisher [3] establishes that “emotions can be stated as semantic descriptive parameters on the basis of certain indicators on a lexical, morpho-syntactic and stylistic level” [6 p. 125]. I-participation and dismay shown by the linguistic expression are indications of the intensity of emotions, taking the situational and contextual conditions into account [5]. Thus, for example, delight and enthusiasm can be found in a report about a German athlete winning a gold medal, which allows judgmental representations about the outcome of the competition through the reporter – even though it often anticipates the athlete’s emotions during interviews. Yet it still remains in a relatively objective context rather than reach the level of expressiveness of the Spanish goal celebrations mentioned above. In addition, this judgmental dismay can be found in reports about doping cases, for example, where special stylistic means of reporting allow recognition of the journalist’s attitude.

Sport language has particularly a great deal of room for emotions, where the rule structures and the understanding of the idea and objective of the game are defined by standardisation and simplicity. Thus when the Olympic Games are considered in the international context, where the competition progress and results of various disciplines – in particular, swimming and track and field – can be measured with the use of clear and objective parameters such as time, distance or height, Germany joins in with great interest and emotion.

³ *Spiegel Online*, June 2, 2002, www.spiegel.de/sport/fussball/0,1518,198989,00.html. Accessed on September 1, 2008.

Von Krockow [7] made the following polarizing statement:

There is no Christian, Islamic or atheist long jump; neither is there a socialist or capitalist one. Who is “the best” or “not so good” is decided on the basis of metres and centimetres alone. The only thing that counts is the strict comparability of performance conditions (...). Paradoxically enough, the generally understandable performance comparison makes the distinctions clear, for example, between different nations. We share the excitement, celebrate or suffer with “our” athletes, our identification kicks in and wants “us” to be the best. But the Chinese and the Africans wish themselves the same thing, of course.” He does add, however, that “The Olympic athletes like to boast that their movement contributes to peace and understanding between nations. But there has never been a war averted by sport, and no ethnic hatred or xenophobia diminished by it. No, within the Olympic arena the language of sport creates something else: a real global village square for a few weeks. Because it is only on this square that the world gets along. And that, truly, is fascinating enough [7: 51].

In the author’s opinion, however, in globalised Germany as a country of immigrants, the importance of sport and its language can certainly be regarded as contributing to the elimination of cultural barriers in general, or individually as a pedagogical means of conveying social competence, team spirit or I-competences, which has been reflected in numerous academic studies. It is not, however, integrated structurally with didactic measures in the curricula of subject areas of school sport. In Germany, school sport is often criticised⁴, yet even in this criticism the language and communication-promotional opportunities offered by sport are sidelined. The importance of language and communication in sport is often dealt with directly in isolated cases, such as in the “self-coaching” module (“Communication traffic lights”, “Your inner team”) in the concept for promoting school sport “Fit am Ball” initiated by the Sport University

in Cologne and being implemented in no fewer than 1,500 schools in Germany. Otherwise, the conveyance of these competences is usually explicitly in other areas of the school curriculum. On the other hand, sports clubs value the great importance of this issue, though it often fades into the background in particular in clubs with less financial resources or “minority sports”, and turns out to be another case of politicians paying lip service, such as after the planned community finances reform⁵ in 2003.

Sport *as* a language is becoming more and more important in Germany all the time, as an integrating component of a heterogeneous society or as a healthy measure of increasingly stationary leisure activities. Competition at the Olympic Games, professional football or other sporting events are followed with emotions running high, which can easily be seen in team sports such as football with its extensive fan cultures and a high degree of identification between passive spectators and active athletes and players. In an international comparison, however, media sports reporting in Germany tries to be objective, and scrutinises (self-) critically different events and subjects from the world of sport.

In the presentation of German national teams or individual German athletes outside of Germany, the image of Germans with their (often clichéd) virtues and negative characteristics or war history is often drawn on. As the seriousness of the subject on hand increases, however, reporting on events is differentiated even more these days, at least within Europe.

Depending on the sport, anglicisms or – particularly in football – hispanisms have left their mark on the language used today in Germany. Many sports terms have already been Germanised or are used regularly as synonyms for German terms. The language of sport is characteristic even without the dominance of specialist terms, and pushes even socio-economic influences or influences of education or area into the background, even if these can still be identified there, in particular in the case of popular sports. The smaller or more elite the group of people interested in a certain sport is, the fewer diffused specialist terms

⁴ Cf. *Der Spiegel*, Schwere Last, der Schulsport fristet ein Schattendasein [Heavy load, school sport lives in the shadows], issue 34, August 18, 2008, p. 36.

⁵ Cf. *Der Spiegel*, Es geht um Schulen, Bibliotheken und Vereine [It's about schools, libraries and clubs.] Source: www.spiegel.de/politik/debatte/0,1518,260514,00.html, accessed on August 31, 2008.

or sport-specific words and phrases enter the general language, which makes the language advance a separating factor only used by the “inner circle.”

In the academic field it would be interesting to carry out more research, not only in the area of international comparative studies, but also into the use of sports language within Germany in particular, in order to do justice to the continually growing, economic, social and cultural importance of sport and its language in German culture and society.

REFERENCES

- [1] Born J., Aktionsreihe Sprache, Natur, Wissenschaft in Europa, Saarbrücken/Bonn 2007: Sprache und Sport: Diego Buchwald, La Ola und Herthinho-Spanische und portugiesische Elemente in der Fußballsprache, lecture on 7.11.2007 in the Sportpark Nord, Bonn.
- [2] Born J., Lieber M., hrsg., Sportsprache in der Romania. Vienna 2008, pp. 3-10.
- [3] Fischer, Tanja: Emotionen in der Sprache am Beispiel einer Fallstudie zur Berichterstattung der Fußballeuropameisterschaft 2004, (in:) J. Born, M. Lieber, hrsg., Sportsprache in der Romania, Vienna 2008, pp. 216-231.
- [4] Flaschka H., Selbst Coaching, (in:) J. Buschmann, hrsg., Handreichung für die Schulsportförderung, *Fit am Ball*, Köln 2006.
- [5] Jahr S., Emotionen und Emotionsstrukturen in Sachtexten, Berlin-New York 2000.
- [6] Müller J., Der imaginäre Volkscharakter und die Verwendung der Sprache des Anderen – Sportberichterstattung im deutsch-französischem *Kontext*, (in:) J. Born, M. Lieber, hrsg., Sportsprache in der Romania, Vienna 2008, pp. 216-231.
- [7] Von Krockow Ch. Graf, Die Sprache des Sports, (in:) *Die Zeit*, 30, 1996, p. 51.