

From National to Global Obsession: Football and Football English in the Superdiverse 21st Century

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Abstract

Today's football enjoys an unprecedented global status, as the world's favourite sport as well as a mass cultural phenomenon. To a significant degree, it transcends national, social and cultural boundaries. European top teams are characterized by a striking ethnic and linguistic diversity; Manchester United fans may be found across the globe. Today's football can thus be seen as a special example of 'superdiversity,' a notion introduced following far-reaching changes in migration patterns since the 1990s, in Britain and elsewhere. Its emergence coincided with a vastly increased media coverage of football worldwide, in turn contributing to greatly increased use of football language, on television and the internet. Football language—involving communication at various levels among players, spectators, fans and commentators—represents a conceptual sphere shared by the ('imagined') global community of all those who take an interest in the 'people's game.' Consequently, due to football's present-day status, millions of people across the globe are also familiar with football language. Sociolinguistically, it makes up a special part of a person's linguistic repertoire, independently of more conventional sociolinguistic variables. Against this background, we argue that today's football and football language—especially football English as a register of Global English—may serve as a communicative link across barriers related to nationality, culture and language. In this regard, certain parallels are noted between the early social history of British football and the potential of today's football and football English to promote integration and a sense of identity in superdiverse societies, not least by providing opportunities for communicative interaction.

Keywords: football; football English; media expansion; imagined communities; superdiversity; integration

1. Introduction

In his early 19th-century work, *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* (1801/1903), Joseph Strutt claims that 'Herodotus attributes the invention of the ball to the Lydians' (p. 80). Whatever the truthfulness of Herodotus' account, the invention of the ball—alongside that of the wheel—must surely rank among the highest, and most delightful, of human achievements, a manifestation of the ingenuity of *Homo ludens* (cf. Tuchman 1980: 80). Playing around with a ball, by hand or foot, seems to be a universal pastime, well documented throughout human history. An

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oft-quoted example (e.g. Goldblatt 2007: 13) derives from a well-known episode in Homer's *Odyssey*, where the ship-wrecked, naked hero, waking up on a distant shore, finds himself in the unexpected presence of a group of young maidens, servants to Nausicaa, the daughter of King Alcinous and Queen Arete of Phaeacia, enjoying themselves playing catch ball.

Let us now fast-forward a couple of thousand years, with a slight change of perspective, from hand to foot in relation to the ball. In 1409, in Middle English, the word *football* makes its first recorded appearance, as documented in the *OED*. In the Elizabethan Age, the status of football as a popular—and notorious—pastime is clear from, for instance, Shakespeare's reference to it in *King Lear* (Act I, Scene IV), where Kent calls Oswald a 'base football player.' Of equal interest, especially from a gender perspective, is the following passage from Sir Philip Sidney's poem 'A Dialogue Between Two Shepherds' (c. 1580): 'A tyme there is for all, my mother often sayes, / When she, with skirts tuckt very hy, with girles at football playes.'

The rest—British football's conquest of the world as the 'people's game'—is history: from the violent 'mob football' of the Middle Ages (banned by King Edward II in 1314), via the emergence of the modern game in mid-19th-century Britain, followed by its spread overseas, up to its global status as today's favourite sport as well as 'the most universal cultural phenomenon in the world' (Goldblatt 2007: xii). The past 150 years of football can be seen as a spiralling transition from a 'national obsession' (Maconie 2017: 243) to a 'global obsession' (Kuper and Szymanski 2018: 11); Goldblatt (2019: 3) talks about 'the craziness around the game.'¹

Since the appearance of the modern game in the 1860s, communication about it has played a major role—during games, at the pub or on the internet. Football language reflects a conceptual domain shared by the global 'football community,' involving a plethora of countries and languages. For historical reasons, English has played a key role in the international expansion of the game; witness the multitude of English loanwords in many languages, whether as direct loans, e.g. *forward*, *offside*, or loan translations, e.g. German *Freistoss*, Swedish *frispark* 'free kick' (Bergh and Ohlander 2012a, 2017a). The global success of

¹ For some discussion about the reasons for football's worldwide appeal, see Goldblatt (2007: 904–905).

association football, or ‘soccer,’ was facilitated by the worldwide web of trade maintained by the British Empire and the concomitant rise of English as a global language. In fact, both football and English, separately and in tandem, can be regarded as early exponents of globalization (cf. Giulianotti and Robertson 2009: xii).

Our aim in this discussion paper is to explore some sociocultural and sociolinguistic aspects of football in the 21st century, especially the role of football language in today’s global context, where migration and integration are crucial issues. Here the notion of ‘superdiversity’ looms large, introduced in the early 21st century to capture the high degree of diversity, complexity and heterogeneity—ethnically, linguistically and otherwise—following significant changes in migration since the 1990s, not least in Britain (Vertovec 2007: 1043; Blackledge and Creese 2018: xi–xxvii). Our focus is on the potential of English football language to serve as a unifying link, promoting integration, between people in superdiverse settings, also noting certain historical parallels from the early days of the game. Our discussion is mainly based on previous publications, including our own, at the interface of football and football language.

The following section briefly accounts for some different perspectives on football language. Section 3 provides a historical backdrop, pointing to certain social aspects of the early British game that are still relevant, although in a global, superdiverse setting, focused on in sections 4 and 5. Our main arguments and conclusions are summarized in section 6.

2. Football Language

Broadly speaking, football language may be loosely defined as the expressive means used in communication about the game, in a wide array of contexts and perspectives where the game is in focus, on and off the pitch (cf. Bergh and Ohlander 2012b). It represents a universe of discourse shared by speakers of different languages; despite cross-linguistic differences, users of football language(s) have a great deal in common.

More specifically, English—or any other—football language can be characterized as a *special* language, defined by Sager, Dungworth, and McDonald (1980: 74) as ‘the totality of means of expression used by specialists in messages about their special subject.’ In the case of football language, the specialists are the millions of people the world over taking an interest in the game. This means, as we have argued elsewhere (Bergh and Ohlander 2012b), that football language may be regarded as the

world's most widespread special language. However, it has so far been paid relatively modest linguistic attention (cf. Lavric 2008: 5; Bergh and Ohlander 2018: 258).

Maconie (2017: 264), referring to a game between Manchester United and Chelsea, notes in passing that *drubbing* ('the four-nil drubbing of United'), as well as *adjudge*, 'is one of those words only ever heard in a football context.' To be sure, the adequacy of Maconie's remarks may be questioned. But the general point is clear: the special nature of any special language is most noticeable in its vocabulary. Football language abounds in words and expressions with special meanings—e.g. *winger*, *side-foot*, *nutmeg*, *dive*, *four-four-two*—that will strike those without sufficient knowledge of football as hopelessly opaque, to the same degree that many terms in nuclear physics or poststructuralism will produce blank expressions in the eyes of outsiders. However, football language may display other special features than mere terminology, as demonstrated by the verb syntax (omitted objects/complements) in sentences like *Messi shot but the keeper saved* or *Rashford failed to convert* (i.e. score) (see Bergh and Ohlander 2016). Also, like other special languages, football language turns up its own collocations, occasionally making a somewhat mysterious or eccentric impression, e.g. *lethal striker*, *educated left foot*, *clinical finish*, *hairdryer treatment*.

However, in view of the number of people worldwide watching games and communicating about them every week, it may be argued that football language is not only a special language, but also, to a considerable extent, a *public* language, more so than the special languages of most other, narrower fields (Bergh and Ohlander 2012b: 14–16). Its key terms are household words to millions of people across the globe. Words like *dribble* and *penalty kick* are to be found as a matter of course in desk dictionaries and learners' dictionaries alike, increasingly so over the past hundred years (Bergh and Ohlander 2019). There is thus no absolute distinction between football language and general language; football English shades off into ordinary English. A further indication of the publicness of much football-related language is the prevalence of football-related metaphors in non-football contexts—e.g. *(to score) an own goal* and *moving the goalposts*—in English and other languages.²

² Cf. also the expression *(to play) political football*; Goldblatt (2019: 27) notes: 'Some politicians have incorporated football fandom into their carefully constructed public personas and football metaphors into their language.'

It should be stressed that most words that are essential to football discourse are shared by other sports, rather than being exclusive to football: cf. e.g. *foul* and *hat trick* versus more football-specific words like *header* and *corner kick*. This means that underlying football language there is an inventory of vocabulary items shared by sports language at large; football vocabulary in an exclusive sense is just, as it were, the top of the pyramid (Bergh and Ohlander 2012b: 16). Also, like language in general, football language is in a state of constant flux, reflecting changes in the game (new tactical formations, new rules, etc.): half-backs have long been replaced by midfielders, old-style refereeing is now complemented by a video assistant referee (VAR), etc. Such lexical developments regularly spread from football English to other football languages, a hundred years ago as well as now; the term *VAR*, introduced in 2018, is now part of the international football vocabulary. In this way, football English can be seen as a special register of Global English (cf. Crystal 2003).

Obviously, then, football language should not be regarded as a well-defined linguistic, or sociolinguistic, entity. It is not, in any precise sense, the language variety of the football community at large. More appropriately, it should be seen as a specific, context-dependent subset of an individual's total linguistic repertoire (Pennycook 2018), linked to football-related communication (Bergh and Ohlander 2018: 259). Thus, football language can be seen as transcending traditional sociolinguistic notions, such as dialect and speech community. According to Spolsky (2010: 176), 'our linguistic repertoire [is] made up [...] of a wide mixture of features that are associated with various social groupings.' In the present context, the relevant social grouping is the football community at large.

Semantically, football language covers a variety of football-related areas, or subregisters, ranging from the inner core of the game (players, rules, equipment, tactics, match officials, etc.) to more circumstantial aspects (competitions, stadiums, spectators, hooliganism, etc.). Likewise, football-related discourse is characterized by a high degree of heterogeneity in terms of its communicative contexts, whether spoken or written: on the pitch and on the terraces, in official documents and in pundits' commentary, in newspapers, fanzines and the social media, etc. The contextual variation is matched by, and related to, extensive variation in degree of formality; cf. an on-pitch warning shout like *Man on!* and the

complicated formulation of the offside rule in the *Laws of the Game*. (See further Bergh and Ohlander 2018: 259–261.)

The last few decades, following the ‘TV revolution’ of the 1990s (Giulianotti 1999: 86–106; Sandvoss 2003), have seen an exceptional, worldwide expansion of football’s media coverage, enabled by new technology and making it possible—and profitable—to ‘broadcast every game and charge customers premium prices for the privilege of watching on 72-inch screens in their own home’ (Kuper and Szymansky 2018: 132). In this globalization process, English football language has played—and still plays—a dominant role, in live match reporting and commentary, exchanges on the internet between fans in different parts of the world, etc. This, then, is the new reality of the ‘people’s game,’ which means that more people than ever are now exposed to football and football language. It also implies a sort of collective awareness of football’s wider sociocultural role in today’s increasingly global village.

3. Excursus: A Social Perspective on Football and Football Language in the Early British Context

This is not the place for a detailed account of the early history of the modern game. The basic facts are well known, although interpretations of them may differ. Football’s surging popularity in Britain and overseas from the late 19th century onwards, was exceptional. Armstrong and Giulianotti (1999: 3) even claim that ‘[b]y the outbreak of the First World War, football had secured its position as the global game for the twentieth century.’

The fast-growing appeal of football in Britain led to a large-scale social transformation of the game, from an upper-class sphere of interest to the ‘people’s game.’ From the 1880s, according to Mason (1980: 255), ‘it was working men who formed the bulk of players and spectators. In that sense, association football became a working-class game.’ On the other hand, middle-class people were clearly dominant at organizational levels (Russell 1997: 74). Thus, the early days of the game displayed a considerable extent of social diversity.³

The increasing attraction of football also meant increased awareness of football in the public mind, establishing football ‘as a new topic for

³ Cf. football’s gentrification in the last few decades (Goldblatt 2007: 730–731; Kuper and Scymanski 2018: 336, 433).

conversation in the traditional meeting places of pub and street' (Russell 1997: 17). This, it may be assumed, must have contributed substantially to the development of more precise ways of communicating about the game, particularly in terms of a shared vocabulary. In this way, through informal exchanges between people sharing an interest in the game, football language established itself as an increasingly adequate special language, largely cutting across class boundaries as well as dialects or accents. At its centre was the special terminology reflecting different aspects of the game. Interestingly, many of the football words dating back to the 19th century—e.g. *back*, *dribble*, *linesman*, *offside*, *soccer*—were included in early 20th-century dictionaries, such as *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1911). This is a clear indication of the porous borderline (cf. section 2) between football language and general language (Bergh and Ohlander 2019).

From a social angle, the emergence and spread of football language along the lines sketched above meant that people with an interest in football, regardless of social background, came to share some common ground, together with the special language evolving from it. Sharing an interest in football and a familiarity with football language, factory owners and workers alike were part of the—predominantly male—football community. This does not mean that face-to-face, football-related communication between upper-class and working-class supporters was a common ingredient of social life around the turn of the century 1900; Victorian and Edwardian Britain was far too stratified for that. Nonetheless, the popularity of the game across social divides resulted in ever-increasing media attention. Mason (1980:187) states that '[b]y 1915 the football press is enormous!' The 1920s saw the appearance of live radio reporting and commentary. Not least owing to the extensive media coverage—long before television—football was, according to Goldblatt (2007: 177), 'acclaimed across the social scale from the man on the Clapham omnibus to feminist novelists on the fringe of the Bloomsbury group.'

Thus, closely linked to the 'national obsession' with the game in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, football language helped to bring about a conceptual domain, across class boundaries, inhabited by those taking an interest in the game. Among those who did not, many were women. The gender perspective is touched on by Russell (1997: 64), arguing that football gave rise to 'a language, an argot, which could be used wittingly or otherwise to exclude women, or indeed those men who withstood the

game's attractions.' Indeed, to judge by the earlier quotation from Sir Philip Sidney, football may have had a more even gender appeal among the Elizabethans than in the early days of the modern game.⁴

The emergence of the football community in the late 19th century was in large part due to the Industrial Revolution, causing people from surrounding villages and beyond to migrate and settle in the new industrial centres. Kuper and Szymanski (2018: 276) cite Manchester as a case in point: 'Inevitably, most of the early "Mancunians" were rootless migrants. Unmoored in their new home, many of them embraced the local football clubs. Football must have given them something of the sense of community that they had previously known in their villages.'

As a result of these large-scale social processes, a number of British football communities sprang up, centred around recently formed clubs. Together they made up the football community at large, united by a common interest and a common language; it is, perhaps, no coincidence that the word *United* often turns up as part of British club names. It can be seen, then as now, as an example of Anderson's (1983) notion of 'imagined communities.'⁵ Thus, from the late 19th century onwards, football and football language provide a conceptual and social framework—a special sociolinguistic context—shared by millions of people with widely differing backgrounds.

As will have appeared, questions concerning identity and social cohesion, related to club loyalty, are never far away in discussions of football and football language. In this connection, Madsen (2018: 241), while noting previous research interest in the contribution of people's 'sports practice, affiliation and/or consumption' to their 'individual and collective identities,' observes that the role of language in 'these sport-related identity processes [...] has been less of a concern until more recently.' With special regard to football, Goldblatt (2007: 688) points to its importance as 'an instrument of civic, regional and national identity' (cf. also Armstrong and Giulianotti 1999a; Russell 1999). Likewise, Taylor (2008: 96) stresses the vital role of 'sport in general and football specifically [...] in providing a sense of place and belonging,' promoting

⁴ On women's football in Britain, see Woodhouse and Williams (1999); Goldblatt (2007: 78, 698); Pfister and Pope (2018). Cf. also note 6.

⁵ Cf. Harari (2011: 405): 'An imagined community is a community of people who don't really know each other, but imagine that they do. [...] Kingdoms, empires and churches functioned for millennia as imagined communities.'

‘urban civic and community identities.’ In a similar vein, Mason (1988: 112) argues that sport may strengthen ‘the individual’s sense of identity, with [...] a group or collectivity. It can be a district, village, town, city or county. It can be class, colour or country.’ But it can also be a team, a football club. This implies that, despite wide social differences, workers and factory owners supporting the same club may feel they have more in common on match day than they do with, respectively, workers and factory owners supporting another club; club identity—unwavering loyalty to a club—may temporarily trump other identities. Kuper and Szymanski (2018: 351) emphasize the sense of belonging: ‘This is the benefit that almost all fans [...] get from fandom. Winning or losing is not the point. You can get social cohesion even from losing.’

Thus, there is a strong link between individual, subjective identity and social cohesion, based on collective identity, especially in the context of club football. If someone has an all-consuming passion for football, this will surely contribute significantly to their sense of identity, finding overt expression in, among other things, football language. This individual identity blends with the collective sense of group identity experienced by supporters of the same club, their cohesion as a special community (cf. club merchandise such T-shirts, hats, scarves, etc.). In other words, football and football language as identity markers work jointly at both an individual and a collective level. Naturally, however, football identity represents just one among various strands in a person’s spectrum of identities—although, to be sure, a crucial one to the most ardent club fans. Spolsky (2010: 176) specifically mentions ‘football preferences’ as a relevant building block, arguing that ‘it is quite normal [...] to share in several identities [...] and to switch between them in changing situations’ (cf. Fukuyama 2018: 165). Here, inevitably, questions related to the role of language as part of such switching present themselves; linguistic aspects are highly relevant to contextually variable identities (Madsen 2018).

The focus in this section on the early phases of the ‘people’s game’ in Britain has been on its potential as a link between people from various backgrounds, giving rise to socially diverse football communities, in turn promoting the emergence and development of an adequate football language. Further, the role of football and football language in shaping individual and collective identities has been discussed. Some of the issues

raised here will be brought up again as we go on to consider football and football language from a more contemporary perspective.

4. Enter the 21st Century

The rapid expansion of football in the early British context was soon to be followed by its international success story. As noted by Goldblatt (2007: 113–114), ‘the working-class contribution to the early spread of football was minimal,’ but ‘[b]efore the First World War, football spread as the game of the fin-de-siècle urban elites of Europe and Latin America,’ as a consequence of the transnational reach of the British Empire. Internationally, football as the working man’s game came later. This brings to mind its earliest period in Britain, dominated by upper- and middle-class people, only later to be adopted by the working class as the ‘people’s game.’ Thus, a parallelism may be noted between early British football and subsequent developments as the game found new homes overseas, at varying distances—geographically and socioculturally—from its original settings. On the whole, then, similar social tendencies seem to have been at work as football established itself as an increasingly international game.

In football’s early phases as an informal, cultural side effect of British trading relations, it was not only a matter of the game itself; the English language—football language—was often part of the package deal. In view of the international status of English as the language of imperial power and liberal ideas, and considering the upper-class predominance in early football outside Britain, the frequent use of English in non-British football contexts was hardly surprising. ‘The English language itself was considered the mark of modernity,’ but also ‘an essential device for excluding any would-be players from the lower classes’ (Goldblatt 2007: 116). Paradoxically, this seems to have been the case at a time when British football had long ceased to be regarded as primarily an upper-class pursuit.

Thus, much football-related communication outside Britain initially exhibited a kind of ‘English bias’ (cf. Giulianotti: 1999: 9, 166). Traces of this are still present, in the numerous direct loans that are part of football vocabularies worldwide, as already noted. In some ways, therefore, it makes sense to talk about ‘international football English.’

From a present-day perspective, Armstrong and Giulianotti (1999b: 2) suggest that the early spread of football beyond its British homeland might

actually be considered ‘one of the earliest forms of cultural globalisation.’ It may be argued that this process was helped by the roughly simultaneous spread of English as a global language, gathering momentum, like the spread of football, from the mid-20th century (cf. Crystal 2003). This also means that, in the game’s continuous expansion up to the present, the English language has played a significant part. Indeed, the very notion of ‘football English’ captures the long-term ‘cooperation’ between football and English in the run-up to the position of today’s global game.

Let us now proceed to the 21st century. In many ways, the title of David Goldblatt’s recent book—*The Age of Football. The Global Game in the Twenty-first Century* (2019)—says it all. The overall impact of the present-day game is summarized as follows:

The level of mainstream and social media coverage accorded the game is simply vast and unending. The game attracts, at its peak, audiences that dwarf other sports, shows and genres; and when it does so, it gathers eyes and minds in acts of collective imagining like no other spectacle on offer. Everywhere, as it has for over a century, football creates and dramatizes our social identities, our amities and our antipathies. No other sport, no popular cultural form, has been the subject of this degree of adulation. Football is first: the most global and most popular of popular cultural phenomenon [sic] in the twenty-first century. (3)

In short, the game’s status in the ‘age of football’ vastly transcends that of an ordinary sport.⁶ The same point, expressed differently, is driven home by Kuper & Szymanski (2018: 73): ‘Some of the most famous people in the world are footballers, and the most watched television programme in history is generally the most recent World Cup final.’ In the above quotation, Goldblatt specifically stresses two aspects of the game, emphasized in our preceding section: ‘collective imagining’ and ‘social identities.’ Both of them are closely related to the notion of imagined communities (cf. section 3), to which we will return in due course.

⁶ It should be noted that Goldblatt (2019) also pays lavish attention to the downsides of the present-day game: commercialization, corruption, politicization, racism, etc. He further hints at an alternative perception of the game: ‘there is no shortage of irrational, myopic, deluded and obsessive behaviour in the football world. Interpreted in this light, football is rendered as a twenty-first-century version of the Roman Circus, a crude but effective instrument of rule that distracts and disables public consciousness’ (3). But he also stresses the ‘persistence and now rapid growth of women’s football, as a grassroots mania, as a professional sport and increasingly as a national and global spectacle’ (28).

Kuper and Szymanski (2018: 510–511) also note that ‘by 1990, the so-called third wave of globalization was under way. Increased world trade, cable television and finally the internet brought football to new territories’; ‘Suddenly the Chinese, Japanese, Americans and many urban Indians could see football’s magic’ (cf. Sandvoss 2003). The global expansion of football, at an accelerating pace since the advent of the new millennium, means that more people than ever now come into contact with the game on a regular basis. The lion’s share of the worldwide growth of the game has undoubtedly taken place via live TV or streaming services on the internet, rather than in the form of boosted attendance figures in football stadiums. For instance, all major—especially European—football leagues can now be watched across the globe, in live TV broadcasts or after the event; this also applies to other major competitions such as the Champions League, the European Championship and, of course, the World Cup.

This situation implies that increasing numbers of people are also engaged in communication about football. In particular, not least owing to the ubiquitous, televised presence of the English Premier League, people worldwide are exposed to football English in live match reporting as well as commentary—even though native football languages are also used in reporting on Premier League games watched outside Britain. There is thus a continuous flow of football English into other cultures and languages, infiltrating them in the form of new terminology and expressions, reflecting changes in or around the game. Such lexical influence, as previously pointed out, may turn up as direct loans or loan translations. The recent term *VAR* has already been mentioned as a direct loan in many languages. Some five years earlier or so, the expression *sitting midfielder* (where *sitting* means ‘defensive’) had made its appearance among Swedish TV commentators as *sittande mittfältare*, a straightforward loan translation; similarly, the expression *parking the bus* (i.e. employing a very defensive tactic) is often rendered *parkera bussen* in Swedish, a word-for-word translation.

On the whole, then, football language in the 21st century can be seen as a continuation of trends and processes present a hundred years ago, in the early days of football’s international spread. Back then, the influence of English football language was facilitated by the media of the day, mainly newspapers and radio broadcasting. In our own times, the media explosion of the last few decades—mainly, the vastly increased TV

coverage and the emergence of the internet—has multiplied the amount of football-related communication carried on, in the form of listening and reading, as well as talking and writing.

Naturally, not all of this communication about football is in English. However, given the worldwide Premier League coverage combined with the status of English as *the* global language, the increasing spread of football English is clearly an accompanying feature of football's expansion. For example, on international chat forums, discussing recent games, spectacular goals, players, transfers, etc., conversations are likely to be carried on in English, where a shared familiarity with relevant football vocabulary is key. Such knowledge is promoted by English-speaking commentators and pundits, and also by match reporting in the minute-by-minute format on the internet and elsewhere (e.g. Bergh 2011; Chovanec 2018). Equally important, as stressed by Kuper and Szymansky (2018: 141–142), 'all leading clubs and most leading players are on social media, in multiple languages, adding new followers every minute'; '[a]s late as 2011, many football clubs weren't even on Twitter or Facebook.' In these multilingual settings, the use of (football) English as a common language is a natural expedient. For instance, Cristiano Ronaldo's Facebook page is in English, although his native language is Portuguese (Kuper and Szymansky 2018: 142).

All this means that the spread of football English in this 'age of football' is facilitated and speeded up in comparison with the early days of the game. Promoted by the worldwide appeal of present-day football, English football language—and, by extension, English in general—has become part of a global cultural environment shared by millions of people around the world, despite a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This brings us back to the notion of superdiversity in relation to football and football language.

5. Football, Football English and Superdiversity

As pointed out in section 1, the notion of superdiversity was coined to account for the high degree of diversity and heterogeneity arising from large-scale changes in migration patterns from the 1990s onwards, especially in Europe. It is characterized by complexity, mobility and unpredictability (cf. Blommaert 2013: 6; Blackledge and Creese 2018: xxi–xxvii). However, as noted by Karrebaek and Charalambous (2018: 73), the concept itself is controversial: 'within socially oriented linguistics,

the meaning of superdiversity is contested and there is no agreement on how or if it should be adopted.’ In the following discussion, it will be used merely as a convenient descriptive term.

First of all, from a football perspective, it may be observed that the rise of superdiverse environments, e.g. in London and other big cities in Britain, took place more or less simultaneously with the large, media-driven expansion of football and football language across the globe, starting in the 1990s, as previously noted. This circumstance, deriving from coincidence while also representing two aspects of globalization, should be kept in mind as we go on to consider the intersection of football, football language and superdiversity. As in section 3, our main focus will be on the potential of football and football language to serve as a uniting force in various social contexts.

As regards football language in relation to superdiversity, three different levels of increasing scope will be considered: (1) clubs and players, (2) supporters and fans, (3) society at large. We are aware that superdiversity, as a term, was originally intended to capture the larger societal perspective (level 3), especially ‘in the context of rapid demographic change in London in the early twenty-first century’ (Blackledge and Creese 2018: xxii). In our view, however, it can be fruitfully employed in narrower, football-related contexts, such as that of football clubs and players (level 1) as well as the much larger circle of supporters and fans (level 2).

In a football context, especially in European elite clubs, superdiversity is nowadays a conspicuous—but regular—feature, as even a cursory glance at team lineups in, for instance, the Premier League will reveal; ‘foreign-sounding’ names are now the rule rather than the exception. Goldblatt (2007: 700) clarifies that, by the early 21st century, ‘European football has experienced its greatest ever influx of foreign players’; more specifically, ‘foreign players comprised nearly 60 per cent of Premiership squads in 2004, hailing from sixty-one different countries’ (733; cf. also Giulianotti and Robertson 2009: 89–92). Underlying this sea change was the so-called Bosman ruling by the European Court of Justice in 1995, banning restrictions on foreign EU players within national leagues and allowing free movement between clubs without transfer fees.⁷ As a result,

⁷ As regards the Premier League, Kuper and Szymanski (2018: 422) note: ‘The switch from a mostly British league to a mostly foreign one can be dated to 1995, the year of the “Bosman ruling”’; even before that, however, foreign players were

top clubs are now to be seen as veritable ‘foreign legions,’ many high-profile players changing clubs and countries of residence numerous times during their careers. A Swedish case in point is Zlatan Ibrahimovic, who has changed clubs ten times—involving seven different countries—in the two decades elapsing since his start as a professional footballer in Sweden. The difference between today’s situation and that of, say, thirty—let alone a hundred—years ago is astounding.

The case of Zlatan Ibrahimovic is by no means unique. At club level, in the higher divisions of European football, the once strong local connection of most players is long gone. Broadly speaking, the difference in this regard—exceptions are certainly to be found—between the higher and lower divisions of football is stark, partly overlapping with the difference between professional and amateur football. European as well as American and Chinese elite clubs now function as transient workplaces for the most attractive players and coaches/managers, ever on the move. In a way, they may be said to be at one end of the much-debated ‘somewhere–anywhere’ spectrum, proposed by Goodhart (2017) to account for certain aspects of British 21st-century society and politics. Ibrahimovic, like most other top footballers with a sufficiently high market value, comes across as a typical ‘anywhere,’ i.e. someone not permanently rooted in one place, benefiting from globalization—a fitting present-day example of the well-worn Latin expression ‘Ubi bene, ibi patria.’ At the other end, we find lower-division players, of limited value in the transfer market, more firmly rooted in their local and national environment.⁸ These are the ‘somewheres’ of today’s game, certainly much closer to football’s social roots in the early days of the ‘people’s game.’ For example, as pointed out by Kuper and Szymansky (2018: 533), ‘Manchester United [...] started life as a club in Manchester, it soon became a club in England, later a club in Europe, and today is a global club.’

In other words, the present-day status of football as a truly global game, with top-club players having a variety of different national, cultural,

not totally absent from British football, although on an extremely modest scale. For discussion of negative aspects of European football’s large-scale import of foreign players, etc., see Goldblatt (2007: 701–703).

⁸ One notable exception is the Italian international Francesco Totti, sometimes referred to as *L’Ottavo Re di Roma* ‘the eighth king of Rome,’ who played top-flight football for one and the same club, AS Roma in Serie A, throughout his entire senior career, i.e. from 1992 to 2017.

ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, has in a few decades transformed the game from a local/national to a global ‘obsession.’ In the superdiverse club sphere, on and off the pitch, there is of course the same need as in other settings to communicate about professional matters. Given the multilingual nature of today’s top football, English—football English—becomes the default option, as the lingua franca of coaches/managers and players, body language and translanguaging making up additional communicative resources (cf. Wei 2018).

The use of football English in many of today’s dressing-rooms is in line with the use of Global English among other ‘anywheres’ in multilingual environments. Further, as shown by Ringbom (2012) in the local context of a football club on the isle of Åland, in the Baltic Sea between Sweden and Finland, the use of football English as a bridge between different linguistic backgrounds is not necessarily limited to global top clubs and players. This, too, is a consequence of the global nature of today’s football coupled with widespread familiarity with football English among players and coaches.

The next level of superdiversity to be considered is also closely related to football clubs, especially top European ones. We now cast our net wider so as to capture clubs’ ‘outer’ circle, that of supporters and fans. From this perspective, involving infinitely more people than the ‘inner’ club circle just discussed, football’s global position becomes more or less synonymous with the superdiversity of its fandom.

Goldblatt (2007: xi) refers to clubs as ‘global brands.’ Let us once more return to Manchester United as an illustrative example. In a previous quotation from Kuper and Szymansky (2018: 533), the development of Manchester United from a local English club to a global one was mentioned. In the present-day world of the internet, this means that its supporters can be found in many different parts of the world. A recent survey, commissioned by the club and reported in *Manchester Evening News* (August 17, 2019), indicates that while the club’s fan base has been growing steadily in Europe, the Middle East, Africa and the Americas, its most notable increase can be found in the Asia Pacific region, particularly in China, where a figure of 253 million fans and followers is reported. In comparison, at merely 2.2 million, UK fans of Manchester United find themselves heavily outnumbered, in the ‘relegation zone,’ by supporters on foreign soil. Whether completely reliable or not, these figures give a rough indication of what it means to be a global club in today’s football—

even though, mainly for historical reasons, Manchester United may be a somewhat special case.

Thus, ‘long-distance supporters’ make up an overwhelming majority of the fan base of many European top clubs, a diaspora of football communities; formerly local, they have turned global. Again, this kind of situation—historically extreme—would hardly be at hand without the existence of today’s worldwide television; ‘since about 2000, viewers beyond Europe have been switching onto European games’ (Kuper and Szymansky 2018: 533). To this should be added the public breakthrough of the internet and social media at about the same time (cf. Leppänen, Peuronen, and Westinen 2018).

In view of their geographical spread and sheer numbers, long-distance supporters of, in particular, European top clubs can be seen as a prime example of imagined communities, united by their interest in football and, especially, their loyalty to a specific club.⁹ In most cases, they have never been present to watch their favourite team play live in a stadium. Nor have the vast majority of them ever met, and are unlikely ever to do so. Nonetheless, they make up recognizable football communities, with a ‘tribal’ identity reminiscent of the mental cohesion of club supporters a hundred years ago, in cities like Manchester, Liverpool and London; even then, the majority of them did not know each other personally. Thus, despite differences, today’s global football communities have a great deal in common with the local ones in the early days of the game (cf. Goldblatt 2007: 908).

Historically, supporters of the same club, rooted in the same local environment, shared the same local and national identity, whether in Britain, Germany or Sweden. This usually meant sharing the same language. The present-day superdiversity of the global game and its imagined communities of long-distance supporters has ushered in a wholly new situation as regards communication between supporters. Above all, the advent of the internet and social media has immeasurably facilitated

⁹ Harari (2011: 408) argues that modern imagined communities can be seen as ‘tribes of customers who do not know one another intimately but share the same consumption patterns and interests,’ citing Manchester United fans, vegetarians and environmentalists as examples. Thirty years earlier, Morris (1981) had referred to the ‘soccer tribe’ in the title of his book, noting various tribal characteristics in the collective behaviour of the football community at the time, well before worldwide television and the internet.

contact between football fans around the world, making today's football communication an almost trivial everyday pursuit. Here, as in the 'inner' club circle discussed above, English in general and football English in particular are central. Familiarity with the conceptual sphere of the game combined with some knowledge of 'international' English football vocabulary can go a long way towards establishing and maintaining football-related contacts across borders and continents. In some ways, global club supporters communicating in (football) English may even be regarded as a special breed of 'anywheres.' Also, as pointed out earlier, there is no hard and fast distinction between football English and ordinary English; from a pedagogical point of view, initial use of even rudimentary football English may give rise to more advanced levels of communication in English.

The time has now come to adopt a broader, societal view of superdiversity, where matters of football and football English in relation to migration and integration are in focus. Since we have elsewhere (Bergh and Ohlander 2018: 261–265) dealt at some length with the basic issues involved, we will here summarize the main points and arguments presented in our previous study.

Our perspective is mainly European. The general background has already been outlined, arising from superdiverse environments in many countries as a result of recent large-scale migration, with the refugee crisis of 2015 as a high-water mark. In the context of clubs and players, Goldblatt (2019: 12) points out that '[i]n the last two decades, new flows of refugees and economic migrants have made their footballing mark,' with many players of migrant descent. From a wider societal perspective, questions concerning migration and refugees have dominated much political discussion in Europe, especially so the Syrian refugee crisis. In many countries, including Sweden, discussions and debates have to a large extent centred on problems of integration. Here, we would like to argue, football and football language—especially football English—may have a role to play.

In section 3, the potential of football and football language to cross class boundaries in the early days was brought to the fore: the game and its special language created their own social domain, a reserve that to some extent, in a football context, could overrun other affiliations. Underlying this was, on the one hand, a shared interest in the game itself and, on the other, unflinching loyalty to a particular club. Although the overall context

at the time was basically local, it may nonetheless hold some relevance for the wider perspective of present-day superdiversity. For one thing, as stressed by Kuper and Szymanski (2018: 277), there was a pervasive element of migration from the surrounding countryside, contributing to the swelling numbers of football supporters in the big cities of Britain as well as Europe at large: ‘The newcomers cast around for something to belong to, and settled on football. Supporting a club helped them make a place for themselves in the city.’ In other words, as argued earlier, questions of identity, belonging and social cohesion—i.e. questions of integration—were highly relevant a hundred years or so before today’s superdiverse settings.

Therefore, it seems to us, a parallelism may be discerned between the historical situation in football’s initial phases and present-day superdiversity. The same forces and processes as in the early days may be observed today, though on a much larger scale. In both kinds of environment, similar issues relating to integration tend to arise; in both cases, despite important differences, a shared interest in football and familiarity with football language may be seen as paving the way for communication, promoting opportunities for interaction and—at least temporarily—bridging social gaps. In this way, football and football language could be jointly envisaged as an instrument of integration. Along similar lines, Giulianotti (1999: 34) argues that ‘[f]ootball’s traditional and modern forms have [...] cut across three key kinds of social identification: nation, class and locality’ (cf. also Madsen 2018).

Basic to our view of football and football language as a potential instrument of integration is the global spread and sociocultural status of football, the near-universal ‘obsession’ with the game, making it a regular topic for conversation and, occasionally, heated discussion among its transnational fandom. Football fans naturally include large numbers of migrants and refugees, with different language backgrounds. In particular, due to the status of English as a global language, many of those arriving in Britain are likely to have some knowledge of English. Further, a substantial proportion of them—mostly male, to be sure—may be assumed to have an interest in the game, including the Premier League, thus also some familiarity with football English; some of them may even be long-distance supporters of British clubs.

Naturally, the situation is different for migrants arriving in, for instance, Germany or Sweden, two countries commonly associated with

large intakes of immigrants, most of them without any prior knowledge of German or Swedish. A fair number, however, are likely to have some knowledge of English, enabling them to get in contact with people in their new countries. Here, again, football may well turn out to be a convenient topic for conversation, even when carried on chiefly by means of some mutually recognizable English football vocabulary. The main point is that a large proportion of (male) immigrants—to Britain and other countries—may share an interest in football with their hosts, providing unpretentious opportunities for casual contact with them, or with other immigrants, in stadiums and pubs as well as in improvised kickabouts. In this, football English may play an essential role.

At a general level, Fukuyama (2018: 165) argues that ‘the condition of modernity is to have multiple identities, ones that are shaped by our social interactions on any number of levels.’ With regard to football, Giulianotti and Robertson (2009: 160) claim that the game may indeed provide a basis for social cohesion. Thus, football’s potential for bringing people together, if only temporarily, is well known (as, indeed, is its potential for antagonism). Its role in promoting spontaneous communication by the use of football English, even in superdiverse settings, should not be underestimated. Such informal interaction may contribute to integration, a sense of community and social cohesion, in much the same way as in the early days of British football. In short, a shared interest in football combined with some knowledge of football English should be seen as a relevant factor in contemporary issues concerning migrants and integration in global, superdiverse settings.

6. Summary and Conclusion

From its British ‘mob football’ roots in the Middle Ages, the ‘people’s game’ has today, in the early 21st century, developed not only into the world’s most widespread and popular sport; football has also acquired a unique position of global mass cultural significance. This has been our point of departure throughout this article. We have explored the potential of football and football language—a special but also a (partly) public language—to serve as a link between people, transcending barriers related to class, nationality, culture and language, all of them salient dimensions of present-day superdiversity.

Drawing on parallels between football’s early social history and its 21st-century environments, we argue that today’s football and football

English—as a special register of Global English—merit attention in discussions of integration, social cohesion and identity formation in superdiverse societies. In the imagined, global communities of football—involving clubs, players and supporters worldwide—football English should be assigned a role in promoting contacts and communication within and between football's different levels of imagined communities. Most such communication may be assumed to occur on the internet, bringing together, for instance, football fans with a plethora of backgrounds but with a shared interest in some specific club. In our view, similar processes, deriving from opportunities for informal social interaction focused on football, may be at work in offline settings, where a high degree of superdiversity is a prominent feature of much present-day social life. In this way, football and football language may serve as an integrative force, contributing to social identities and social cohesion.

Our discussion has to some extent been of a tentative nature, due to the fact that research on the specific issues raised has so far been thin on the ground (cf. Madsen 2018: 241). There is thus a need for more detailed studies into the interactional processes—where some knowledge of football English is clearly relevant—that may promote integration in superdiverse contexts. Such research into the field of language and migration studies (cf. Baynham 2011; Wessendorf 2018), focusing on informal communicative situations at the football–migration interface, should enable the arguments presented here to be put on a somewhat firmer empirical footing. More generally, it would further illuminate the social potential of football and football language in today's increasingly global communities.

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