

Language Study

AFL Commentary

Sace No. 102372J

Commentary is an essential part of all professional sports. Commentators have a crucial role not only describing action as it unfolds but also conveying essential background information and enhancing the viewers' experience of the game. Commentators use language in a range of ways to accomplish this such as clever word use (puns, clichés), colourful descriptions, word emphasis (intonation), and highlighting the highs and lows of the game through strong emotional language (See Caldwell 2009, Owens 2006). AFL commentators also cleverly adapt to the high intensity and low intensity points within the game play using breaks in play to discuss events in more detail. AFL commentators practise these techniques until perfect so that their delivery is exceptional and they are able to maintain the excitement of a live experience.

“It is not what commentators say but the way they say it - and how loudly and emphatically - that appeals to the public.” (see Fans fall for brash and barge approach)

This is one of the reasons why Australian Rules Football is watched and loved throughout Australia.

A range of Grand Final games played in years 2012 and 2013 are the basis of this language study. These have been observed and analysed to gather information of a commentator's role and examples of their language use.

Pre-game Commentary

AFL Commentary starts pre-game, before the players are even out on the ground. The commentators' role before the game is to set the scene for the viewers, so they can gather an understanding of the events about to take place and get a feel for the atmosphere. The commentator's generally first talk about the weather, the location and the crowd

“It has been a remarkable Melbourne day... As this crowd is really filling up as it does on this day.” (1:30-1:46 AFL Grand final 2012).

Once the commentators have finished setting the scene, they more directly focus on the players and coaches, where they talk about the challenges ahead and discuss what positions they predict the coaches will play the players in and how well the players will do. They also pick out interesting points about the players or coaches and discuss them in depth. Examples include if it is a milestone game or if

the player or coach is retiring after the game or if the player is back from injury. They analyse these factors and inform the audience to create drama and put the game in the wider context of the season and the sport as a whole. The commentators use a range of metaphors and descriptive terms to invest the game with an almost war-like status. For example the players are described as

“Tough, brutal body players, always at the ball” (Hawthorn Vs. Geelong 4:40).

This sort of description is exactly what is required before a game to create anticipation.

“If you can smell a prize, you can almost smell what lies ahead for one of these two clubs”
(Hawthorn Vs. Geelong 3:01).

Obviously viewers watching the football on the television would be incapable of ‘smelling’ anything that is happening at the ground, yet the language used entices the viewers to watch and listen closer to try and analyse every minor detail as they are interested in what lies ahead for the two clubs.

Once the players have run out onto the ground, the commentators usually question another commentator on ground level, down on the oval, more specifically about the weather and the oval conditions. The commentator on ground level answers the question, yet makes reference to other factors of the game at the same time.

“We had a shower run through here about half an hour ago, the good news is though, for everybody here tonight, there was a massive roar that went up there at the conclusion of the national anthem, is that there’s no further rain expected tonight. The temperature is around 13 degrees Richo, but just looking at the stars out there tonight and there is so many of them, it’s a galaxy of stars, there’s no question about that. Isaac Smith, what sort of impact do you think he will have on this game?” (Hawthorn Vs. Geelong 3:20)

The last sentence from the quote is where the person on ground level poses a question back to the people in the commentary box and link the topic back to the game. The use of language is fast, short and can be confusing to the uninitiated. Facts and feelings are skilfully woven together so as to give the audience the information they need but, perhaps more importantly, convey the atmosphere and emotion of the live game.

Commentary During the Game

AFL commentators must adapt to the live, fast paced, constantly changing nature of the game. To keep up with this pace, the commentators tend to use very short sentences such as

“Robert Thompson’s kick, okay.” (2:09:42 AFL Grand Final 2012)

Meaning that Robert Thompson’s kick was not that fantastic, yet it was effective. The short sentences are a necessity as the commentators do not have enough time to tell every minor detail. If they tried to tell every detail in depth then they would get too far behind play and will be commentating on actions already finished minutes before. This kind of live commentary is difficult as the commentators have to maintain a constant balance between keeping up with the action and saying something useful. One of the ways commentators adapt standard English usage to accomplish this is by “subject inversion”. This allows a commentator to refer directly to the action as it happens and tack the player’s name on the end. It meets a functional need but it has also become part of the “style” of football commentary and gives a feeling of being close to the action.

“Smother was a good one by Smith” (Hawthorn Vs. Geelong, 13:42).

TV commentators also rely on visuals to aid and supplement their descriptions. This allows them to very briefly describe the player’s actions and it still be understood by viewers as they have also seen what has happened. Example of this include:

“Guerra has to wait” (Hawthorn Vs. Geelong 9:16)

He then gets hit after the mark is taken.

“Wants 50, played for it, not there.” (Hawthorn Vs. Geelong 9:19)

Without the visuals to see that Guerra had been taken out after taking the mark, the viewers would struggle to understand what had happened just from hearing

“Guerra has to wait. Wants 50, played for it, not there.” (Hawthorn Vs. Geelong)

Although Australian Rules Football is very fast paced, there are obviously times throughout the game where the play is at a low point, or there is a stoppage due to the ball going out of bounds or a free kick, or even after a goal or point is scored. Commentators use these stoppages as time to discuss personal opinions, comment on the game, add personal opinions on what they would do in the present situations, and also to add facts about the individual players and coaches, the teams as a whole and the crowd:

“This is the biggest grand final crowd that the Swans have ever played in front of. Their biggest crowd was a semi-final in the 1970 against the Saints. 99683 here today.” (Hawthorn v Sydney Swans):

Statements like this do two things: they put the game in the wider historical context of the sport and they convey something of the immediate atmosphere for viewers at home. The historical context is important because that is where a lot of the drama comes from. This is not a game of street footy between a few guys who just met. It is a grand struggle that has gone on for years. One key role of a commentator is to weave the current game into the grand narrative or story called AFL. That is why constant comparisons with past games, statistics and the politics of who joins or leaves clubs all have relevance.

Reporting crowd size in this way also gives insight to home viewers, on the amount of noise that the crowd are making, the amount of pressure the players are under due to the extensive amount of people watching them at the game. Even though this sentence is used in a time where there was a stoppage in play, the sentences are still shorter or clipped, and when read out of context do not make complete sense. But in the context of the game with visuals displayed, it is relatively easy for viewers to interpret what is being said by the commentators. For example, when the commentator is talking about the crowd, the visuals on the screen, display a panning shot round the ground to the packed in crowd. These visuals are used as a cue to enhance the information that commentators are saying.

AFL commentators also adapt to the highs and lows of the game's pace. The commentators follow the game's pace and react to it. If the games pace picks up, then the commentators' pace appears up beat and the emphasis that they put into their words also picks up as the fast pace parts are exciting for the viewer's so the commentators are trying to enhancing the viewers' excitement. The fast paced commentary usually occurs when the play is in the forward fifty, thus before a goal or point is scored.

When the games pace slows the commentators also slow down in their commentary. This slower pace in commentary usually occurs when the game play is continuously having stoppages which generally occurs more during wet weather games. An example of this change in pace can best be viewed when a player gets the ball in the forward fifty, dodges some opposition players and has a snap at goal but misses. When the player is dodging the opposition players, the commentators pace and emphasis on words is intense and also the volume is raised. When the player misses the goal and scores a point, or no score at all the commentator's volume and emphasis drops and becomes lower as the viewers' take in what has just taken place.

“It is not what commentators say but the way they say it - and how loudly and emphatically - that appeals to the public.” (see *Fans fall for brash and barge approach*)

This quote describes an AFL commentators' language use well. The commentators use a range of different techniques to enhance viewers' experience and heighten their excitement. The viewing experienced is improved by the emphasis that the commentators put on the language they use, how they follow the pattern of the game and how they add facts and figures about the players and coaches. By using these techniques, the commentator's enhance the viewer's experience of a football game and help promote the game.

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