A Spoken Genre Gets Written

Online Football Commentaries in English, French, and Spanish

Carmen Pérez-Sabater
Gemma Peña-Martínez
Ed Turney
Begoña Montero-Fleta
*Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, Spain*

Many recent studies on computer-mediated communication (CMC) have addressed the question of orality and literacy. This article examines a relatively recent subgenre of CMC, that of written online sports commentary, that provides us with written CMC that is clearly based on firmly established oral genres, those of radio and television sports commentary. The examples analyzed are from two English, two French, and two Spanish online football (soccer) commentaries. The purpose of the study is to examine oral traits and genre mixing in online football commentaries in the three languages and carryover from the spoken genres of radio and television commentaries to this developing genre, following Ferguson. Special attention is paid to Web page design. The study reveals that form and content of online football commentaries are strongly affected by the style of the online newspaper.

**Keywords:** discourse analysis; electronic discourse; informalization; orality; online newspaper; football commentary

In this article, we examine a selection of written online newspaper commentaries of the 2006 Football World Cup. Football (soccer) commentaries are traditionally an oral genre of radio and television; the 2006 World Cup celebrated in Germany witnessed the international appearance of written online, or minute-by-minute (MBM), commentaries. The examples analyzed here are from two English, two French, and two Spanish newspapers online.

**Authors’ Note:** We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editor of *Written Communication*, Christina Haas, for their help and their suggestions during the revising process of this article. Their work has greatly improved our original manuscript.
The study forms part of an ongoing line of research centered on the presence of oral traits in written genres of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in English, Catalan, French, and Spanish as part of the current process of informalization of general discourse.

The shift toward orality in written and, more generally, public discourse in English is a well-documented phenomenon and seems to have a long history. Leech (1966) underlined the tendency toward “colloquialisation” in public discourse during the past 200 years and identified “a popular style of communication which might be called public-colloquial” (p. 75). Similarly, Biber and Finegan (1989) described the “general pattern of ‘drift’ towards more oral styles” (p. 487) in different genres of written English during the past four centuries. Haussamen (1994) argued that during the past 400 years, in English, written sentences have tended to become shorter and more direct. Other scholars who have studied this phenomenon are Chafe and Danielewicz (1987), Baron (2000), and McWorther (2003).

Examining recent trends in English, Van Dijk (1999) spoke of the blurring of genres as a result of the new technologies, and, within the framework of critical discourse analysis, Fairclough (1995) analyzed the process extensively. Fairclough centered on the processes of informalization or conversationalization and technologization of discourse, underlining that in modern discourse practices there are more and more “mixtures of formal and informal styles, technical and non-technical vocabularies, markers of authority and familiarity, more typically written and more typically spoken syntactic forms” (p. 75) as the distinctions between written and oral genres become blurred. Fairclough (1989) also studied the impact on current discourse practices of discourse technologies, which involve the conscious application of social scientific knowledge to the production of texts. We have adopted a slightly different and broader definition of the term technologization to include discourse practices that have been transformed or rendered possible (which is not the same as determined) by new technologies. In this context, there have been numerous studies associating CMC with markedly informal styles (Baron, 1998; Crystal, 2001; Ferrara, Brunner, & Whittemore, 1991; Maynor, 1994; Murray, 1991; Pérez-Sabater, 2007; Posteguillo, 2003; Yates, 1996, 2000).

This process of informalization seems to have deeper historical roots and to have been particularly rapid during the past 30 years in English, but it has also drawn the attention of some scholars in the languages related to this article. Thus, the Catalan linguist Tuson (2006) pointed out that, thanks to the new technologies, and despite the informal style of writing, there has probably never been an epoch in which people, especially young people,

In this context, we examine a relatively recent subgenre of CMC, that of written online or MBM sports commentary, as it provides us with written CMC that is clearly based on firmly established oral genres, those of radio and television sports commentary (although probably influenced by written accounts of matches and sports discourse in general). Moreover, the passage from the oral to the written should also be influenced by the more general sociological and ideological phenomena that normally characterize sports discourse.

According to many scholars in CMC, such as Ferrara et al. (1991), Murray (1991, 2000), Herring (1996, 2004), Werry (1996), Collot and Belmore (1996), Yates (1996, 2000), Baron (1998, 2000), Crystal (2001), and Posteguillo (2003), distinctive traits of what Crystal (2001) called netspeak are the use of colloquial and informal language, the use of rhetorical typography to simulate paralinguistic communication, the use of short sentences, the use of first and second person pronouns, and the frequency of spelling mistakes, among others. All these features have led a number of scholars to posit the hybrid nature of CMC, poised, as it were, between oral and written discourse. All of these studies have centered on English CMC.

Our previous research into oral features in written texts in general and in CMC in particular in English and Spanish has consistently shown that academic texts, online fora, and e-mails are markedly more informal and include many more oral traits in English than in Spanish (Montero-Fleta, Montesinos-López, Pérez-Sabater, & Turney, 2003; Pérez-Sabater, Peña-Martínez, Montero-Fleta, & Turney, 2007; Pérez-Sabater, Turney, Montesinos-López, & Montero-Fleta, 2001; Turney, Pérez-Sabater, Montero-Fleta, & Montesinos-López, 2003). These results bear out the idea of scholars who have compared English CMC with that of other languages (Lan, 2000; Yongyan, 2000). Discourse studies on general writing have also underlined the difference of formality between English and Spanish (Connor, 1996; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). The situation is well summed up in Machin and van Leeuven’s (2005) comments on media discourse in Spain:

In Spain there is still a reluctance to mix information and entertainment . . . [and] there are well-patrolled boundaries between high culture and popular
culture. . . . Seriousness is not only a matter of content, but also of style. In Spain it is very important to show your level of culture and education through the way you speak and write. Introducing elements of “street language” in your speech is not done. (pp. 142-143)

Although we have not previously researched the presence of orality in written genres in French, we have supposed that the case of French will be similar to that of Spanish following Pires (2003) and Armstrong (2004).

Hypotheses

Early studies of CMC have postulated it as a more or less homogeneous genre incorporating important elements of orality into written language. Intercultural studies of CMC have suggested that the tendency toward orality is stronger in English than in other languages. However, the evolution of the World Wide Web and the growing presence of institutional and organizational Web pages have changed the situation. Institutions and organizations tend to try to establish a formal presence rooted in the written tradition. This article seeks to establish if linguistic features identified as markers for orality in interactive CMC are also present in this new genre of online written sports commentary, a genre that, on one hand, depends on a newspaper, an organization that is clearly placed in the written tradition, and, on the other, is based on the earlier oral genres of radio and TV spoken sports commentary. As far as we know, this the first intercultural study of this new online genre.

In this context, our main initial hypotheses are as follows:

1. English CMC will show more oral traits and more evidence of genre mixing, that is, the mixtures of formal and informal styles, technical and nontechnical vocabularies, written and spoken syntactic forms that we have seen that Fairclough identifies as typical of modern discourse practices, than will French or Spanish.

2. Written commentaries in online newspapers will exhibit a significant carryover from the spoken genres of radio and television commentaries.

Materials

The data of this study consist of online or MBM commentaries of football matches from the 2006 World Cup, in English, French, and Spanish (there were, unfortunately, no online commentaries in the Catalan press), comparing the MBM commentary of one football match, France versus
Spain, in four newspapers: two Spanish generalist newspapers, *El País* and *El Mundo*, one French newspaper, *Le Monde*, and one French sports newspaper, *L’Équipe*. For the British online newspapers, *The Times* and *The Guardian*,1 we analyzed the England versus Portugal match. We have chosen different matches because it seems interesting to study a match in which the newspaper’s national team was involved to see if this influences the commentary, as Beard (1998) suggested.

However, we have included an extract from each newspaper studied describing an incident of one game, between England and Portugal, in which the English player (Rooney) stamped on a Portuguese player’s (Carvalho) testicles and was sent off. This gives the reader of this article an idea of what an MBM football commentary looks like and of the important differences in Web page design and helps the reader anticipate the way it may impinge on the language used. A table describing the typography of all the newspapers can be found in the appendix.

In *El País*, we find four columns: one to indicate the minute of play, another for the icon, another for the name of the incident, and the fourth for a description of the incident (see Figure 1).

Thus, in minute 61:29, we find an icon for a red card, “tarjeta” (“card”), in the third column and “tarjeta roja a Rooney” (“red card for Rooney”) in the fourth. In the description of the incident itself (minute 60:59), there is no mention of how Rooney fouled the Portuguese player: “Falta de Rooney, ha agredido Ricardo Carvalho” (“fowl by Rooney, he attacked Ricardo Carvalho”).

In *El Mundo*, the layout is simple, with two columns, one to indicate the minute of play and another for the commentary. An icon is used to indicate the red card (see Figure 2).
The incident merits two commentaries. There is an initial summary (minute 61:00) of the red card, with the use of capital letters and bold type and the word “ATENCIÓN” (“attention”) to draw the reader’s attention. This is followed by a more detailed description explaining the principal consequence, England are left with 10 players. The incident itself is in bold type and is at once hyperbolic and euphemistic (“the English forward tramples on all Carvalho’s most intimate parts”).

To turn to the French newspapers, L’Équipe’s commentary is brief but does not aspire to the laconic objectivity of El País, as can be appreciated here by the use of evaluative language (“Rooney is sent off after an ugly gesture toward Ricardo Carvalho”): The use of the euphemism “mauvais geste” is worth noting. The incident is accompanied by an icon indicating the red card (see Figure 3).

Like L’Équipe, Le Monde uses different font colors to distinguish types of information, but although we find four colors in L’Équipe, Le Monde uses a total of seven. Moreover, as can be appreciated in Figure 4, the commentary is divided into columns. The commentary appears in the right-hand
column when the center of attention is the Portuguese team and in the left-hand column when the attention is centered on the English team. Normally (but not always) the criterion as to which team is the center of attention is which team is attacking, so the two-column format reflects the physical division of the football pitch into two halves, affording a novel and creative example of the interplay of visual and verbal (Geisler et al., 2001).

In both English newspapers, the commentary appears in the center of the browser window. Neither The Times nor The Guardian uses columns; each commentary begins with the minute of play in bold type, followed by the incident (see Figures 5 and 6). In both commentaries from The Times, there are indicators of orality in the informal language: “flipped his lid,” “OK.” The incident itself is described using a neutral word for Carvalho’s body part: “Rooney stamps on his groin.”
The Guardian too relates Rooney’s sending in bold type and uses a vocabulary that is also markedly informal but, unlike the rather middle-class language of *The Times*, *The Guardian* uses words that would be considered taboo by many: “He stamped on Carvalho’s swingers.”

**Method**

After examining the whole MBM commentary in each newspaper, the analysis is centered on the study of the parameters related to the linguistic characteristics of the commentary using the final 500 words of each MBM commentary. Following Biber (1988), we considered it more adequate to balance the corpus with the same number of words in each commentary.

To corroborate the first hypothesis, that English CMC will show more oral traits and more evidence of genre mixing than will French or Spanish, we have examined the last 500 words of each MBM for linguistic features identified as markers of orality by Baron (1998, 2000) and Crystal (2001) and the other specialists in CMC cited in the introduction. More specifically, we consider

a. The average sentence length (Ferrara et al., 1991) and average commentary length (the commentaries are normally organized into discrete paragraphs),

b. Unconventional indicators of prosody and intonation typically used in CMC (Yus, 2001),
c. The amount of colloquial, evaluative, and technical vocabulary (Angell & Heslop, 1994),

d. The number of fragmentary sentences (Murray, 2000), and

e. The use of first and second person pronouns (Werry, 1996).

Following Chafe and Danielewicz (1987), to evaluate lexis, each commentary has been coded by at least two of the authors of the article.

To confirm the second hypothesis, that written commentaries in online newspapers will exhibit a significant carryover from the spoken genres of radio and television commentaries, we follow Ferguson’s (1983) article on spoken sports commentary, “Sports Announcer Talk: Syntactic Aspects of Register Variation.” In this seminal study, Ferguson showed that oral sports commentary is characterized by prosody, sports lexis, and a series of syntactic traits. As we examine prosody in our first hypothesis and the number of occurrences of lexis associated with sport and colloquial language in the second hypothesis, we consider the following syntactic features that Ferguson identified as characteristic of spoken sportscasting:

1. Fragmentary or, in Ferguson’s terms, simplified sentences,
2. The presence of heavy modifiers,
3. Tense usage,
4. The use of routines, and
5. The use of inversion, that is, structures in which the predicate precedes the verb, and the use of result expressions.

Results and Discussion

Before entering into a detailed analysis of our data, it is worth pointing out two general features of the MBM commentaries. First, in the examples of the Web pages, it can be seen that MBM football commentaries are anomalous written texts in that the overall textual structure is organized not endophorically but exophorically. All the commentaries examined are organized by the minute of play, expressed in Arabic numerals and emphasized (normally in bold), followed by a commentary. Insofar as exophora is usually associated with spoken language, all texts can be said to have elements of orality. Moreover, unlike most written texts, they must be produced in real time. Another very general way some of the commentaries incorporate elements associated with orality is that of interactivity: Three of the newspapers, Le Monde, The Times, and The Guardian, allow readers to send in e-mails, which may be incorporated into the commentary. We have followed McQuail’s (2005) definition of
interactivity as “the ratio of response or initiative on the part of the user to the ‘offer’ of the source/sender” (p. 143).

**Hypothesis 1**

The first part of this section presents the results for each of the five linguistic traits that specialists have claimed to be markers for orality in CMC. The second part discusses to what extent orality and genre mixing can be associated with different languages in online MBMs.

**Results**

*Average sentence length and average commentary length.* Table 1 shows the time covered by the last 500 words of each MBM, the average sentence length, and the average commentary length.

In regard to the amount of time, the most salient feature is found in the commentary of the French sports newspaper, *L’Équipe*, as the 500 words analyzed cover more or less twice as much time as the other commentaries. The commentary is divided into periods of no comment (up to 5 minutes), sudden, quickly described plays, and description with comment of important moments in the game. This alternation of longer and shorter sentences may, at times, give the impression of a contrast between more linguistically elaborate language and more urgent, more oral language, but it probably reflects the
difference between the language of play-by-play commentators and expert summarizers in oral radio and television commentaries.

As far as average sentence length is concerned, the most striking finding is that the Spanish newspapers use noticeably shorter sentences than do the English or French newspapers.

The very short average sentence length (4.6 words per sentence) in El País’s MBM would seem to be the result of the newspaper’s bid to achieve a purely denotational style. El Mundo, on the other hand, opts for a very colloquial style that clearly and consistently seeks to recreate oral commentary. The online commentary is made up of very short sentences (6.9 words per sentence) despite there being no justification for this in the layout. Many of these short sentences are verbless expressions of emotion: “QUÉ PENA, ESPAÑA ELIMINADA” (“what a shame, Spain eliminated”) or imperatives of encouragement for the Spanish team including a spelling mistake: “VENGA ESPAÑA, VENGA. DALEM [sic] DALE” (“Come on Spain, come on. Go for it/them, Go for it/them”).

Finally, in regard to the average length of the commentaries, it is noteworthy that in both The Times and The Guardian, which have very simple formats, the minute of the game, in bold type, and then a paragraph have comparatively long average commentary lengths (33.3 words for The Times, 45.5 for The Guardian).

Unconventional indicators of prosody and intonation, typically used in CMC. Many scholars have underscored the importance of prosody in oral sports commentaries (Beard, 1998; Ferguson, 1983; Hoyle, 1989, 1991). It is obviously impossible for a writer to reflect the many prosodic features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper online</th>
<th>Reduplication of Letters</th>
<th>Reduplication of Punctuation</th>
<th>Words in Capital Letters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>El País</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Mundo</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L’Équipe</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le Monde</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Times</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that characterize oral commentary in a written text. However, a number of conventions that seek to recreate paralinguistic features have been developed in CMC. We have, therefore, analyzed the written commentaries for instances of such conventions, centering on the reduplication of letters and punctuation and the use of capitalization. The results are shown in Table 2.

The most salient finding is that in the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo*, 348 of the 500 words (69.6%) are capitalized, despite the fact that, according to Lynch and Horton (1999), on the computer screen capitalization is one of the “least effective methods for adding typographical emphasis . . . [it] is uncomfortable and significantly slows reading” (p. 91). The commentator has clearly chosen to seek to indicate the “intonational” features of oral commentary by means of capitalization, which is also accompanied by reduplication of letters in narrating the two goals by France and a near miss by Spain, which is rendered by “FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUERAA JOAQUIÑ” (“out Joaquín,” Joaquín being a Spanish player).

*El Mundo*, then, clearly exploits CMC conventions taken from e-mails, chats, and online fora to convey oral, paralinguistic features. This is in stark contrast with the other newspapers examined, which make sparing or no use of such conventions.

Moreover, in context, the use of capitalization may be more naturally interpreted as a typographic convention than as some kind of shouting. This is certainly the case of *El País*: Of the five words in capital letters, two correspond to announcing goals (in the third column, devoted to simply naming the play and accompanied by an icon), and three signal the end of the game.

In *Le Monde*, by far the most sophisticated of all the newspaper commentaries examined, we find both reduplication of punctuation marks and capital letters. The use of capital letters is, in some cases, clearly a typographical convention, being used to write a player’s second name in sections that give technical background information about players. In other cases, however, it is probably a marker of paralinguistic elements, as the reduplication of punctuation marks and a generous use of exclamation marks in general give a strong impression of orality. This sense of orality is all the keener by contrast with sections of the commentary that rely on written, printed conventions. Thus, the complex conventions of its Web page allow the commentator to refer to both oral and printed traditions.

*L’Équipe* makes sparing use of capital letters, which are limited to announcing the two goals scored, as in the case of *El País*. Rather than an expression of paralinguistic features, it would seem more fitting to interpret this as a written, typographical convention, an interpretation reinforced by the fact that the word appears in a different font color together with an icon.
Both "The Times" and "The Guardian" have very simple formats, and both seem to reject the early CMC conventions to express paralinguistic features.

Amount of colloquial, evaluative and technical vocabulary. In sports-casting involving a national team, the question of the amount of evaluative and colloquial vocabulary is interesting, as evaluative lexis allows the commentator to side with his or her country’s team, whereas colloquial vocabulary may be used to heighten the public’s sense of national identity. Table 3 shows the use of lexis in the different newspapers of this study.

The most striking feature of Table 3 is the total absence of evaluative and colloquial vocabulary in "El País". It overtly avoids any indication of national bias.

"El Mundo”’s commentator, on the other hand, uses colloquial expressions in a clear attempt to recreate the oral genre of sports commentary and express his or her support for the Spanish team through evaluative language.

The French newspapers are not so aggressively biased toward the national team in their choice of lexis. Support for the French team is more subtly expressed by the amount of time devoted to commenting French plays and the way the French team’s goals are announced (with capitalization and greater reduplication of punctuation marks).

"The Times" uses little colloquial language, and it is usually rather dated and firmly within accepted, middle-class speech (“What on earth was that?” “Yikes”). "The Times" MBM is homogeneous linguistically and stylistically, and, like oral sportscasters and sportswriters in general, the commentator’s persona clearly favors his or her country’s team. "The Guardian" includes an important presence of the commentator’s persona, and he or she, uncharacteristically, supports the other country’s team. In "The Guardian", we find a
mixture of types of vocabulary, ranging from very modern slang and taboo words to highly educated lexis.

In the section analyzed of The Guardian’s MBM commentary, there is an important number of evaluative (34) and colloquial expressions (18). Unlike those in The Times, the colloquial expressions are clearly contemporary and clearly seek not to be representative of British, mainstream, middle-class culture. Indeed, The Guardian MBM introduces some abhorred shibboleths, such as the use of “stood” instead of “standing” (“he was stood at the edge of the box”). Although the demotic predominates, the hieratic is not absent: Thus, we find archaisms such as “dullard” to present the English team lineup as “Our Brave Dullards (4-5-1),” expressions that could be considered learned (“hubris,” “nemesis,” “epitome”) and technical acronyms (“USP”).

**Fragmentary sentences.** We examine the use of fragmentary sentences more fully in the discussion of our second hypothesis on the carryover of spoken sports commentaries to written MBMs. In many widely studied genres of CMC (e-mails, online fora, chats, etc.), fragmentary sentences are clear markers of orality. According to Murray (2000), one of the strategies that CMC users employ to reduce the time needed to write are “simplified syntax, such as subject or modal deletion” (p. 402).

In the majority of MBMs, the interpretation of the presence of fragmentary sentences depends on the overall design of the Web page and ultimately on the attitude toward the event that the newspaper seeks to convey. The two Spanish newspapers show the highest usage of fragmentary sentences. In the austere, stylized design of El País, the fragmentary sentences are most naturally interpreted as examples of the written register of block language (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985, p. 845), the laconic languages of headlines and newsflashes. In El Mundo, the same linguistic phenomenon is clearly an attempt to simulate the immediacy and urgency of spoken commentary. These nonsentences sometimes use traditional CMC conventions to simulate prosody.

**The use of first and second person pronouns.** Yates (1996) argued that the use of first and second person reference is characteristic of interactive CMC. First and second person pronouns are generally associated with oral language, whereas third person pronouns are generally associated with written language (Biber, Conard, & Leech, 2002). As Table 4 shows, the vast majority of pronouns are in the third person.

It is noteworthy that El País makes exclusive use of third person singular pronouns, reflecting its denotational reporting of discrete plays and
placing it clearly in the written tradition. The eight uses of first person plural in El Mundo all enlist the commentator and the readers in the Spanish team’s struggle and are often associated with traditional CMC indicators of orality such as capitalization.

Another noteworthy feature of Table 4 is that, unlike the Spanish and the French newspapers, in the MBMs of both The Times and The Guardian, we find the use of the first person singular to signal the commentator’s presence. For example, in both commentaries, at the end of 90 minutes, and before going into extra time, both commentators tell readers that they will take a short break: In The Times, the commentator says, “I’m off to take up smoking for the first time in my life. But will be back,” whereas The Guardian’s commentator informs us, “So. It’s extra-time, and I’m off for a really, really nervous No1.”

This use of the first person singular is exclusive to the British MBM commentaries. It is essential to creating a conversational, oral style and merits comment. When we analyze the entire commentaries, we find that there is much more first person singular reference in The Guardian (47 instances vs. 13 in The Times). In The Guardian’s MBM, 8 of the occurrences (17.0%) were contained in readers’ e-mails, whereas only 1 reader example (7.7%) is found in The Times. There is also an important difference between whether first person singular reference occurs while the game is being played or in the preview, halftime, and so on. In The Guardian, 37 examples (78.7%) occurred with the game in play, whereas in The Times there were only 6 (46.2%).

There is an important quantitative difference in the commentator’s self-reference, but the difference is also qualitative. Thus, although in the prematch

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper online</th>
<th>First Person Singular</th>
<th>First Person Plural</th>
<th>Second Person Singular</th>
<th>Second Person Plural</th>
<th>Third Person Singular</th>
<th>Third Person Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>El País</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Mundo</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L’Équipe</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le Monde</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Times</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
period the commentator from *The Times* associates his or her persona with the English team and presents the game as moment of national unity, the commentator from *The Guardian* takes a very different stance, feeling it necessary to warn his or her readers that he or she wants Portugal to win.

**Discussion**

Our first hypothesis needs to be significantly nuanced. We find that the presence of oral traits varies not so much with languages as with the overall stylistic approach to the MBM, which is reflected both in the language used and in the design of the Web page. In relatively informal CMC genres, such as personal e-mails and online fora, there is a greater informalization of discourse in English than in romance languages. In online newspapers, the situation is different, as the presence of orality depends on the corporate image that the newspaper wishes to project. This bears out Moreno’s (1997) claim with regard to the language of research articles (RAs) that the writing conventions of the RA genre rather than the peculiarities of Spanish and English writing cultures govern the rhetorical strategies preferred by writers. In online newspapers, the newspaper decides the writing conventions that its journalists must follow. These conventions are mediated by the newspaper’s choice of Web page design that ranges from a very simple, rudimentary design in the case of *El Mundo* and the British newspapers, to the highly organized and sophisticated conventions of the French newspapers, to the austere and stylized design of *El País*. It is probable that Web page design in turn is conditioned by broader ideological questions. Football as a tool to express national identity has been examined by many scholars (Baillette, 1996; Galeano, 2006; Hernández-Alonso, 2003; Hobsbawm, 1990; Vázquez-Montalbán, 2005).

In regard to the phenomenon of genre mixing, we find that the two Spanish newspapers seem to configure coherent, homogenous subgenres of MBM online commentary: The two subgenres can be distinguished on the basis of “formal and informal” styles with their concomitant values of “involvement and detachment” (Chafe, 1982, p. 45). Thus, *El Mundo* clearly seeks to recreate oral football commentaries, using the conventions of early CMC to express paralinguistic features (capitalization, the duplication of letters and punctuation), colloquial and evaluative expressions, and short, sometimes fragmentary, sentences. The commentator makes no attempt to be neutral and patently supports the Spanish team; this support is expressed never through the use of the first person singular but through evaluative language, imperatives, and the first person plural form. *El País*, on the other
hand, seeks to develop a purely written, detached style, reducing commentary to objective facts, avoiding any use of evaluative and colloquial vocabulary, and exclusively using third person singular pronouns. Thus, there is no mixing of technical and colloquial vocabulary that Fairclough associates with the informalization of discourse: *El País* maintains the “well-patrolled boundaries” between the technical and nontechnical that Machin and van Leeuven (2005) identified as a characteristic of media discourse in Spanish. The newspaper seeks a “*possible degree zero of expressivity*” (Hernández-Alonso, 2003), which excludes evaluative expressions or “street language.”

As we have mentioned, the use of linguistic traits that CMCs studies have usually considered as markers of orality, such as short sentences and capitalization, need to be judged within the overall context of the Web page. Although in *El Mundo* these features do seek to evoke oral commentaries, the same features in *El País* seem to stem from the tradition of the printed word.

*L’Équipe* seems to steer a midcourse between the two options found in the Spanish MBMs. The Web design of *Le Monde* is by far the most sophisticated, which allows its MBM to mix different styles and genres: Together with objective information organized in a way that clearly draws on written genres, we find elements of orality in its use of punctuation and some degree of interactivity with its readers.

We have seen that in *The Times* MBM is homogeneous linguistically and stylistically. It has a limited presence of the first person singular forms and, like oral sportscasters and sportswriters in general, the commentator’s persona clearly favors his or her country’s team. *The Guardian*, in contrast, includes an important presence of the commentator’s persona, and he or she uncharacteristically supports the other country’s team. In *The Guardian* we also find a mixture of types of vocabulary, ranging from very modern slang and taboo words to highly educated lexis. As we have seen, neither newspaper makes relevant use of CMC conventions to express orality.

This rejection of traditional CMC conventions is all the more significant as both newspapers, together with *Le Monde*, introduce elements of interactivity. The presence of the first person pronouns is related to the fact that the French newspaper *Le Monde* and both British newspapers introduce elements of interactivity with the audience by allowing the audience to send in e-mails. At first sight, this could suggest that they share traits with other CMC genres such as chats, e-mails, and online fora.

However, the quantity and the kind of interactivity are very different, and they seems to be modeled on radio and television genres. On the radio, and to a lesser extent on television, listener participation has existed since at least the 1940s. We may distinguish two kinds of oral interactivity in talk radio:
indirect and direct. Indirect participation is when the listeners phone, for example, to request a record or to dedicate a song to someone else: The listener does not speak but is named by the program’s host. In direct participation, the listener actually speaks to the program’s host or guest. Although call-in programs are very popular, they are not normally associated with sports programs. Interactivity in *The Times* is marginal, in *Le Monde* it is limited to indirect participation, but in *The Guardian* it approaches a one-to-many chat as the commentator answers many of the e-mails.

### Hypothesis 2

#### Results

To corroborate the second hypothesis, that written commentaries in online newspapers will exhibit a significant carryover from the spoken genres of radio and television commentaries, we have centered on the study of Ferguson (1983), who analyses (radio) “sports announcer talk” as a genre and register, highlighting contrasts and similarities with everyday conversation such as the use of special prosody, lexis, and syntactic characteristics. As we have already examined prosody and lexis in the first hypothesis, in this section we center on the syntactic features typical of sports commentary. And following Ferguson (1983), we examine (a) fragmentary or, in Ferguson’s terms, simplified sentences, (b) the presence of heavy modifiers, (c) tense usage, (d) the use of routines, (e) the use of inversion (i.e., structures in which the predicate precedes the verb) and result expressions. Table 5 shows the results for the first three syntactic traits studied.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fragmentary Sentences</th>
<th>Heavy Modifiers</th>
<th>Present Simple</th>
<th>Present Progressive</th>
<th>Past</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Newspaper online</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>El País</em></td>
<td>75</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>El Mundo</em></td>
<td>23</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>L’Équipe</em></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Le Monde</em></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Times</em></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Guardian</em></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fragmentary sentences. Ferguson identifies prosiopesis as a typical syntactic feature of announcer or commentator talk and identifies three main types of simplification: omission of (a) a personal pronoun, the subject of the immediately following verb, (b) a pronoun plus copula, and (c) a copular verb. As sentence simplification is rather different in written language, we have analyzed all types of fragmentary sentences (Quirk et al., 1985).

We have found that fragmentary sentences are more common in the Spanish newspapers *El País* (75 out of a total of 108 sentences, 69.4%) and *El Mundo* (23 of 72, 31.9%). As we have already suggested, it is noteworthy that the use of fragmentary sentences has very different stylistic results in the two commentaries and responds, in part, to the different overall organization of the Web page. In *El País*, it is a consequence of decision to adopt a purely denotational approach to reporting, which tends to a telegraphic, tickertape style. In *El Mundo*, it stems from the newspaper decision to recreate the oral genre; thus, we find a number of capitalized, fragmentary sentences formed by paratactically combined verbless clauses.

Of the two French newspapers, in *L’Équipe* we find 4 of 40 fragmentary sentences (10.0%) and in *Le Monde* 12 of 33 (36.4%). We have mentioned that *L’Équipe*’s MBM is more leisurely, and much is taken up by background, expert commentary; this probably accounts for the few fragmentary sentences encountered. The fragmentary sentences of *Le Monde*’s MBM are clearly associated with orality, expressed by reduplication of punctuation marks and colloquial football slang.

In both *The Times* (6 of 37, 16.2%) and *The Guardian* (9 of 48, 18.8%), the fragmentary sentences correspond to verbless, heavy noun phrases.

Heavy modifiers. All newspapers make an important use of heavy modifiers. This is particularly the case in the Spanish newspapers (*El País*, 54; *El Mundo*, 34). Again, the use of the same syntactical device gives rise to very different styles in the two newspapers. In *El País*, the heavy noun phrases are technical names for plays in football or technical names followed by mention of the participants: “Penalty de Thuram por falta a Pablo Ibáñez” (“penalty by Thum for a foul on Pablo Ibañez”). We find more or less the same structure in *El Mundo*, but generally integrated into longer sentences that incorporate evaluative and oral elements: “Otro fuera de juego más de Henry, y ya van . . . cinco del galgo francés” (“another offside by Henry and that makes up . . . five by the French greyhound”). Heavy noun phrases are probably so common because they are easily expandable (by means of postposed adjectives, in French and Spanish, relative clauses, or prepositional phrases).
**Tense usage.** Ferguson suggested that in English sportscasting we find basically three tenses: the present simple for actions taking place at the moment of speaking, the present progressive to describe actions of extended duration, and the past for a rapid action regarded as having already happened. Ferguson also claimed that the general divide between the two present tenses may be that the present simple is used for direct reporting whereas the present progressive is used for background reporting.

French and Spanish oral sports commentaries also make extensive use of the present simple to describe current actions. But there are two points of tense usage that contrast with English. We had supposed that as French, which lacks a present progressive, uses the verbal periphrasis être en train de, we would find only the present simple. In Spanish, reference to the past is rather different from that in English. In standard Castilian Spanish, the present perfect is used for recent past actions, whereas the past is used for nonrecent past actions. However, on the radio and television, the past tense is often used for recent actions, and this is the norm in sports commentary.

We have found that in the MBMs examined the most common tense is the present simple, making up 72.2% of all verb forms (67.0% in Spanish, 84.5% in French, and 69.0% in English).

Of the two Spanish newspapers, *El País* uses only three tenses (38 instances present, 11 instances perfect, and 2 instances imperfect). It is noteworthy that this MBM uses the perfect to describe recent past actions, in accordance with the normative rules of Castilian Spanish but at odds with tense usage in spoken commentaries. *El Mundo* makes 10 uses of the past to narrate recent actions and 5 uses of the perfect to refer to states that have extended over the whole game. It also makes one use of the present progressive to give background impressions. It therefore incorporates the convention of spoken commentary in Spanish. Of the 9 examples of the use of other tenses, 6 are imperatives of encouragement for the Spanish team or for individual Spanish players.

In French, all direct reporting uses the present simple, and we find one use of the verbal periphrasis être en train de to describe what is happening on the coach’s bench. The passé composé is used only after the match to address the readers. There are a number of uses of the future tense, which can be explained by the fact that they would go on to the next round of the competition.

Tense usage in the British newspapers broadly conforms to Ferguson’s predictions. Almost all of the uses of the past tense refer to the sending off of the British player, Rooney, an incident that had happened before the section of commentary we have analyzed. In *The Guardian*, more than half of the
examples of the present simple (26 of the 47 in the whole commentary) are used not to describe play but to introduce readers’ e-mails, another clear indicator of the importance of interaction with the public.

**Routines.** In written commentaries, routines can be associated with the use of icons and with the use of set phrases for plays. *El País* makes abundant use of routines. Apart from the icons used, the 47 names of play included in the third column contain only 8 different noun phrases describing the play. The French newspapers use both icons and font color as kinds of routines. There are no routines in the British newspapers. This is probably because of the personal style the commentators wish to create.

**Inversion and result expressions.** We have found no important use of inversion in full sentences or use of result expression in the MBMs.

**Discussion**

As we have seen, Ferguson claimed that oral sports commentary can be identified as a genre by its use of expressive prosody, its technical lexis and a series of syntactic structures.

In regard to prosodic elements, as we saw in Hypothesis 1, the only newspaper that clearly and consistently uses traditional CMC conventions to recreate paralinguistic features is the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo*, in a clear attempt to reproduce the atmosphere of oral commentary. *El País*, on the other hand, consistently avoids any recourse to the oral genre. In the French newspapers, the complex Web page design and the elaborate use of font styles and font colors open up the possibility of a range of styles. Thus, in *Le Monde*, we find the expression of background information firmly rooted in the print tradition, together with a clearly rhetorical use of exclamation marks that evokes oral language. The British newspapers, while cultivating an informal, oral style, consistently avoid traditional CMC markers of prosody. As for vocabulary, there is a clear and unsurprising carryover of lexis associated with football.

As far as syntactic elements are concerned, we have found no carryover of inversion and the special use of result expressions that are characteristic of oral commentaries. This may be because, in written English at least, such uses have associations with literary genres.

The use of icons can be considered analogous to routines of oral commentary. Moreover, the restricted code for commentary in *El País* makes this newspaper’s MBM read like a series of routines, of names of plays in
the third column and syntactically foreseeable expansions in the fourth. The British newspapers also avoid routines.

For the other syntactic features, fragmentary or simplified sentences, heavy noun phrases, and tense usage, the predictions of Ferguson are largely confirmed by all MBMs. This confirmation over three languages may suggest that commentators in the three languages seek similar solutions to the problems posed by real-time written commentary.

**Concluding Remarks**

The emergence of a new genre of CMC, online written newspaper sportscasting, has allowed us to examine two hypotheses related to the informalization of discourse in different languages and cultures. We have found that certain linguistic features of oral sportscasting carry over to written MBMs. The study has also established that commentators may follow very different strategies to introduce elements of orality into their written texts: Only one newspaper has used the conventions associated with informal CMC genres such as e-mail and online fora.

It is therefore clear that in written online football commentaries it is not possible to make a ranking of the presence of oral elements based on language or culture. Our study has shown that the two Spanish newspapers adopt diametrically opposed positions to the presence of oral elements in the written commentaries. However, it is interesting to note that they are consistent in their styles, which may reflect, as we mentioned above, Machin and van Leeuven’s (2005) idea about the existence of “well-patrolled boundaries” in discourse practices in Spanish: *El País* adopts a serious, detached stance, whereas *El Mundo* attempts to transmit the emotion of traditional, partisan oral commentaries of international sporting events. As a result, commentary in *El País* relates to the conventions of printing, whereas *El Mundo* uses traditional CMC conventions to create a more immediate, oral atmosphere.

We have identified two essentially different ways of including orality into written discourse in this new CMC genre. At one extreme, we find *El Mundo*, which seeks to recreate oral commentary by means of conventions associated with early CMC genres: e-mails, discussion groups, and chats. At the other extreme, we find *The Guardian*, which uses none of these conventions but does use the commentator’s personality, interaction with readers, and slang and taboo words.
Another salient point that has surfaced in our study and that requires further research is the likelihood that the stylistic features of each commentary are ultimately determined by the newspaper’s ideological stance in general and toward football in particular. We have analyzed international games involving the newspaper’s national team precisely to ascertain if the commentary transmits a nationalistic ideology, which would, presumably, be absent from commentaries of domestic games or games between two foreign countries. Many scholars have pointed out that international sporting events are often vehicles for intense nationalist feelings. Hobsbawm (1990), for example, wrote that “the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people” (p. 143), or as Auster (1999) put it, “Countries now wage their battles on the soccer field with surrogate armies in short pants.” Our study has identified very different ideological stances in the newspapers analyzed. *El Mundo*’s support for the Spanish team can be considered chauvinistic. In *The Times*, we find a clear, though less aggressive, identification with England. The French newspapers attempt to be more impartial, but details such as the number of exclamation marks used to announce goals on the part of France and Spain seem to betray a partisan attitude. *El País* avoids any nationalist feeling in its commentary, and the commentator in *The Guardian* manifests from the outset that he or she supports Portugal, the foreign team. Indeed, the writer makes clear that his or her commentary seeks to parody conventional sports commentaries (before the game, we find the following paragraph title: “Paragraph masquerading as a discussion of tactics and team news”).

Our study also suggests that if ideology conditions the style of the commentary, it does so, in part, through the overall design of the Web page and, probably, through the underlying software. Thus, the austere, highly stylized Web page design of *El País* seems to leave very limited stylistic choices to the commentator, in stark contrast to the British newspapers. The French newspapers’ elaborate use of font styles and font colors limits stylistic variation in certain sections while leaving it open in others.

Thus, the study has highlighted the need for future research to examine the complex relationship between ways of introducing orality into online newspapers on one hand and the newspapers’ ideology and Web page design on the other.
# Appendix

## Fonts, Font Styles, and Colors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper online</th>
<th>Commentary</th>
<th>Font Styles And Colors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| *El País*          | Times New Roman | Bold type: Minute, name of plays, announcement of goals (with grey shading)  
Capitalization: To announce the beginning and end of the game and goals  
Icons: Cards, goals, penalties |
| *El Mundo*         | Verdana | Bold type: Minute of commentary  
Capitalization: To express emotion  
Icons: Cards, goals, penalties |
| *L’Équipe*         | Arial | Bold type: The minute of goals, goals  
Capitalization: To announce goals  
Blue: Minute  
Red: A summary at the end of each time of play, to announce goals  
Green: To express important plays as a result of free kicks and corners (which are signaled by a green icon)  
Grey: Substitutions  
Icons: Cards, goals, penalties |
| *Le Monde*         | Verdana | Bold type: End of match, titles, emphasis in background information  
Underlined text: Titles  
Capitalization: For important plays, for players’ second names in background information, to celebrate (although not to announce) one of France’s goals  
Light blue: Atmosphere of stadium  
Blue: Goals  
Yellow: Yellow card  
Red: Titles of information about players  
Turquoise: Statistics  
Green: State of the pitch and weather  
Violet: Information about off-pitch events (e.g., the trainer’s bench) |
| *The Times*        | Arial | Bold type: The minute and important actions  
Italics: For emphasis and for the remarks of the journalist at the stadium |
| *The Guardian*     | Arial | Bold type: The minute and to announce the beginning and end of the game, important actions and in prematch commentary as paragraph titles |
Note

1. The Spanish newspaper *El País* is the largest selling generalist paid-for newspaper in Spain, with a circulation of 457,675 issues every day. *El Mundo* is the second largest, with 314,591. *Le Monde* is one of the leading national daily generalist newspapers of France, selling 400,000 copies every day; *L’Équipe* has an average circulation of 340,000 issues. The second market leader for broadsheets in Britain is *The Times*, with a circulation of 692,581 copies per day. *The Guardian*’s circulation is 378,000 issues per day.

References


Carmen Pérez-Sabater, PhD, associate professor, has been lecturing in English for computer science at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia (Spain), Department of Applied Linguistics, since 1990. She is working in the fields of comparative discourse analysis and computer-mediated communication.

Gemma Peña-Martínez, PhD, is a lecturer in French for business studies at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia (Spain), Department of Applied Linguistics. Her main research areas are textual anaphoric reference and discourse analysis.

Ed Turney, MA, has been lecturing in English for computer science at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia (Spain), Department of Applied Linguistics, since 1990. He is working in the field of critical discourse analysis.

Begoña Montero-Fleta, PhD, is associate professor of English for computer science at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, Department of Applied Linguistics. She is mainly involved in the research of scientific discourse: languages for special purposes, discourse analysis, and terminology.