Abstract:

The development of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) has given rise to a number of linguistic studies of human communication via the computer. The overwhelming majority of these studies have centred on one language, English, and they have focussed mainly on online multiuser environments, chats, e-mails and messages posted to online fora and internet mailing lists. Many studies have addressed the question of orality and literacy in CMC in the light of the work of scholars like Biber and Finegan, who have identified a drift in written English towards orality, or Fairclough, who has highlighted the conversationalization and informalization of modern discourse in English. This paper examines a relatively new genre, that of written online sports commentary. In the 2006 World Cup Competition, a number of newspapers offered online coverage of the matches. The paper analyzes some of these online football commentaries from newspapers in three languages, English, French and Spanish, and examines the web design carry over from oral offline genres, such as radio and television commentaries, to this developing online genre. Special attention is paid to the very different web page formats used by each newspaper and to how the format influences the way oral elements of the offline genres are reflected in the written online genre. The findings are compared with previous research on intercultural differences in Computer-Mediated Communication.

Key words: Discourse analysis, CMC, informalization, football.

Theoretical background

This paper is part of an ongoing line of research centred on two main points: on the one hand, the process of informalization of discourse in English and the extent to which the phenomenon affects romance languages and, on the other, the role of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) in this process.
The informalization of discourse is a well documented phenomenon in English both in diachronic and in synchronic linguistic studies. Biber and Finegan (1989: 487), for example, have documented the “general pattern of ‘drift’ towards more oral styles” in different genres of written English over the last four centuries (cf. Baron, 2000).

Fairclough (1992: 221) maintains that, since the late XX century, the informalization of discourse in English forms a part of the more general technologicalization of discourse practices within the current hegemonic strategies of late capitalism characterised by the tactical polyvalence of discourses, which results in a blurring of the traditionally sharp and rigid distinction between genres and between written and spoken registers.

On the other hand, the advent of computers has arguably contributed to the informalization of discourse in many ways. The use of text processors and desktop publishing programs has dramatically increased the number of authors of public written documents. This process has been accelerated by the Internet and the World Wide Web and most notably by the appearance of the blogosphere. Thus, whereas, at the beginning of the XX century, authorship was, to a great extent, a prerogative of a largely male, educated and elderly elite, in a word, a prerogative of the patriarch, it is currently open to anyone with a computer and access to Internet.

If this process of informalization has been particularly rapid in English, it has also drawn the attention of scholars in other languages. Thus, the Catalan linguist Tuson (2006) points out that, thanks to the new technologies, there has probably never been an epoch in which people, especially young people, have written so much. As for Spanish, Cervera (2001) underlines the drift towards orality in the written language. Similarly, Grijelmo (2001), from a prescriptive perspective, bemoans the informality of written Spanish on the Internet. Pires (2003) studies the informalization of public discourse in French journalism and advertising. Armstrong (2004) compares the processes of variation and levelling in English and French.

While the informalization of discourse is related to the profound technological revolutions that opened up new modes of communication in the wake of the industrial revolution – advertising for a mass audience, the telephone, radio, cinema, television, the computer and text processing, the Internet and the blogosphere– we feel that it is important to avoid an oversimplistic technological determinism. Technology obviously contributes to shaping human behaviour, but the uses we make of technological innovations are ultimately conditioned by broader social and historical processes. In this context, it may be interesting to examine a relatively recent subgenre of CMC, that of written online 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.

We have analyzed online commentaries of football matches from the 2006 World Cup Competition in English, French and Spanish (there were, unfortunately, no online commentaries in the Catalan press), comparing the online commentary of one football match (France vs. Spain) in four generalist newspapers: The Guardian, El País, El Mundo and Le Monde and one sports newspaper, L'Équipe. Discourse practices associated with football are particularly interesting from the point of view of critical discourse analysis. Since the aristocratic Old Etonians' defeat in the 1883 Cup Final at the hands (or feet) of Bolton Olympics, football is a sport that, symbolically, belongs to the working class (Hobsbawm, 1988: 301). In a traditional Marxist perspective, its associated discourse practices are a clear example of bourgeois manipulation of the subalterns, in Gramsci’s sense, a strategic area in the “tactical polyvalence of discourses”.

Our initial hypotheses were that the English online commentaries would contain markedly more oral traits than the Spanish and that the French commentaries would be more oral than the Spanish commentaries. However, a first analysis of the data led us to review our approach as it was clear that, rather than cultural, linguistic differences in informalization of discourse, the main factor involved in determining oral characteristics in the written commentary was webpage design.

The linguistic features of sports commentary have received attention both from the general public and linguists. Beard (1998:61) underlines the social impact of commentators in the late twentieth century, epitomized in the Private Eye column Colemanballs, “[i]t was named after the commentator David Coleman and was a collection of linguistic ‘cock’ups’ made by commentators and sent in by readers”.

In a seminal study published in 1983, Ferguson analyses (radio) “sports announcer talk” (SAT) as a genre and register (153-4), highlighting contrasts and similarities with everyday conversation such as the elimination of noun phrase plus copula, as in “(It’s a) GOAL”, or post-nominal copula, heavy modifiers and routines. From a cognitive linguistic stance,

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1 There are a number of Internet collections of unfortunate expressions made by sports commentators and personalities in English, many of which constitute amusing mixed metaphors. Of special interest in a paper dealing with orality and literacy is Gerry Francis’ “What I said to them at half time would be unprintable on the radio”. However, none of the English examples would seem to reach the dizzy heights of the startling ontological implications of a Spanish commentator’s assertion that a German football team had opened the “metaphorical tin-opener” of the defence of a Spanish team or Maradona’s astounding, Wittgensteinlike incursion into theodicy: when asked why he had left Barcelona, he replied “Cada uno tiene su merecido y eso demuestra que Dios es justo” (“To each according to his deserts and that proves that God is just”).
LaPolla (1986) has underlined the importance in sportscasting of non SVO word order (inversion, clefting and prepositional phrase fronting).

The general process of left dislocation, as described by Bally (1932) and Ross (1967), is, of course, vitally important in commentary: the commentator must topicalize a real world state of affairs and the state may be a prepositional phrase of place (“Just over the bar!”), the minute of the game (“90th minute and penalty!”) or a conventionally designated event lacking subjects or objects worthy of immediate mention (“Penalty!”). As Ferguson (1983: 159) points out prosiopesis in SAT serves to “index the moment” in a “nonleisurely” and “informal” way. Left dislocation serves to syntactically integrate non-subjectlike elements. If such a process is important in oral commentary, it is evidently all the more so in written commentary as there are more limited possibilities to indicate prosodic focalization of real world state of affairs: prosodic focalization can only be indicated in written language by vowel elongation, capital letters, changes of typeface and a rhetorical, as opposed to grammatical, use of punctuation (Baron, 2000).

Results and discussion

As for the two Spanish newspapers we identified two extremes. In El País (figure1), there was a very formal, simple and stylized design, with four columns specifying: i) the minute in the game; ii) official incident indicated by icons, such as a yellow card ( gelecard ) or a goal ( gol ); iii) a linguistic identification of the incident consisting of a noun phrase; iv) a brief description of the incident, typically consisting of a noun phrase and a subsequent sentence describing the play. The only incidents highlighted by a change in colour were goals and the only incidents marked by capital letters were goals and the beginning and end of play. The design, being extremely stylized and sober, leaves little room for the commentator’s creative contribution.
In El Mundo (figure 2), in contrast, we find only two columns, one indicating the minute of the game with icons indicating a yellow or red card and substitutions and another with a description of the play. The descriptions are much more elaborate and incorporate almost all the devices associated with CMC as a type of written speech.

The commentary by El País, offers more formal visual indices of the game, but very little creativity is allowed to the person writing the commentary. We might venture to say that the immediacy of the event is conveyed by the Web page design rather than by the written commentary. In El Mundo, on the other hand only the minute of play and a yellow card are highlighted visually, but the written commentary abounds in the typical characteristics associated with written CMC viewed as a kind of written speech: capital letters to express emotional intonation, reduplication of vowels, spelling mistakes, idiomatic expressions or expressions that are routines in spoken commentaries. There is a clear contrast in the way language interfaces with technology (Boardman, 2005).
The commentary also incorporates a clearly chauvinist vision of the game, with expressions of emotion, judgements on the referee, explicit mention of the two countries including a telegraphic affirmation of the metaphysical nature of the match and descriptions which are cryptic for anybody that is not a Spanish football fan.

When we turn to the commentaries in French newspapers, Le Monde and L’Équipe, we find a somewhat different contrast in styles of webpage design. Like El País, Le Monde is extremely stylized, however, what is most striking is the highly sophisticated nature of the format of Le Monde’s commentary. Moreover, in the case of Le Monde, the stylization of format does not exclude the typical traits of CMC writing to express paralinguistic features.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Le Monde is that the commentary itself is divided between two columns: the commentary appears in one column if the centre of attention in the match is France and in the other if the centre of attention is Spain. Another outstanding feature is the range of text colours. In total, six colours are used in the commentary of this match.

The webpage design of L’Équipe is simpler and less sophisticated. Moreover, besides the capital letters of “BUT” (goal) and bold typeface, there are no attempts to use typographical conventions to simulate paralinguistic features: the absence of exclamation marks is particularly striking. There is more language of reflection, as if the commentator takes on the role of consultant, with a more elaborated syntax.
Finally, The Guardian presents a similarly simple format, indexing the moment in bold type and making a very limited use of rhetorical punctuation. The syntax is involved and full of characteristics related with traditional, spoken sports commentary. The Guardian’s commentary would seem to approximate to a parody of traditional sports commentary targeting readers, like ourselves, who are more interested in the discourse practices associated with sport than in sport itself, as is made clear in the reaction to England’s elimination by Portugal that we have included in Figure 6. A noteworthy feature of the commentary is the presence of a relationship between the commentators and the online readers/writers. The incorporation of readers’ emails into the commentary and a personal farewell of the commentator, something that evidently contributes to the conversationlike style of the commentary, is only present in Le Monde and The Guardian.

**Conclusions**
Online discourse practices related to football are an interesting phenomenon within the “tactical polyvalence of discourses” of late capitalism. The cosmopolitan nature of the Internet makes it difficult to identify purely national, cultural discourse practices. We have seen that the choice of webpage format (and its underlying software) plays an important role in the way features of orality are incorporated into written, online sports commentaries. While playing an important role, technological choices by no means “determine” discourse practices. Thus, we have found commentaries with more formal characteristics in El País and L’Équipe. On the other hand, El Mundo and The Guardian present more oral traits, however, the orality of these two newspapers is very different. Finally, Le Monde shows a very sophisticated technologization of discourse practices including both oral and written traits.

85 mins Spain immediately go on the attack. Thuram beating Torres to Joaquin’s teasing deep cross. These are going to be five dramatic minutes.

GOAL! Spain 1 - 2 France (Vieira 83) Zidane’s free-kick is inadvertently flicked on by Pernia to the back post where Vieira, completely unmarked, heads home. It went in via Sergio Ramos’s right knee - Castillejos might have saved it otherwise - but it will definitely go down as Vieira’s second goal of the tournament.

81 mins Puyol is booked for blocking Henry’s run. It’s a fair decision, though what is not fair is Henry collapsing to the ground and clutching his face as if Puyol had elbowed him. Henry should be booked as well.

80 mins "This is the best referee I’ve seen this tournament," writes Rohan Faroq. "It Italy doesn’t make the final, this is the man. I love the way he’s handling this game." I echo those sentiments.

78 mins After picking up chalk on his boots on the right touchline, Joaquin cuts inside Abdali into the penalty area, but scuffs his left-foot shot into the side-netting.

77 mins "Patrick Vieira’s play has been quite nice," writes Michael Stewart, who, not content with one pun, is keen to make four more. "He’s tackling like a Lyon, taking on trios and Paris of defenders, and making inferences of good passes." Canes Spain stop him?

76 mins Sagnol heads behind Alonso’s dangerous curling cross. Pernia swings in the subsequent corner, but Sanzhez punches clear from beneath his crossbar.

Figure 5. Example from The Guardian

Portugal 3 - 1 England: Ronaldo puts England out The pantomime villain Ronaldo wins it with an excellent penalty. It’s Robinho’s left, and it’s the same, same old story for England. Gerrard and Lampard took awful penalties, but there was big controversy over Jamie Carragher’s miss. Lampard and Gerrard are emotionless, broken, it’s horrible and a little poignant. Rio is crying violently; Tate has mocked him, and it’s harsh because quietly, he had an excellent tournament. Ultimately, however, England found their level - the quarter-finals - and all the blister and blame and bullshit, particularly over Rooney’s sending off, we will get over the next few days can disguise it. That dullest of idots Eriksson has troubles. Who a year to do something that you all could have done. I’m off to drown sorrows I didn’t realise I’d have at this result. Thanks for your emails - Rob.

Figure 6. Example from The Guardian

References


