Minute-by-Minute Football Commentary: 
A Corpus-based Discourse Analysis of Tense and Community within Online MBM

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Abstract

One of the ways in which it has evolved is the expansion of minute-by-minute commentary of live sports events, particularly association football. This article seeks to explore the genre and examine it from three perspectives, namely to what degree it fits Swales’ (1990) discourse community framework, what are its predominant patterns of tense, time and aspect, and how does interaction take place within it. The article concludes with ways in which minute-by-minute commentary can be used by students and suggestions for further research into the area.

Introduction

Sports coverage is just one example of how the growth in popularity and accessibility of the Internet has changed modern journalism and communication. Amongst a myriad of web-based resources such as the online presence of traditional media outlets such as television stations and newspapers, club web pages, Facebook groups, Twitter accounts and fan forums, Internet minute-by-minute (MBM) commentary of professional sports has also evolved. MBM coverage of association football (hereinafter “football”, also called soccer), is very common. Football is a multi-billion dollar industry widely believed to be the most popular sport in the world. For instance, 3.2 billion people, accounting for 46% of the world’s population, saw at least some of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, the latest for which figures are available (FIFA, 2010, p. 9).

In its most basic form, MBM is a simple, objective description of the main events of a single football match on a regularly updated webpage, chiefly a feature of media outlets such as newspapers and TV stations. However, the genre as it exists on some web pages has developed into something more complex, consisting of pregame build-up, in-game simultaneous reporting on multiple games and post-match reaction and
analysis. Added to this is the interactive nature of the genre which allows for and indeed encourages contributions of readers. While still predominantly a sub-genre of sports journalism, MBM also has clear elements of social (interactivity) and new media (on demand access across platforms) and should be viewed as a genre unto itself. Indeed, Chovanec (2009, p. 110) argues that it is “an institutionalised genre of journalism”. Figure 1 illustrates this model of MBM as presented on the British Broadcasting Corporation’s (BBC) Football page (http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/football/), the basis of this study.

Fig. 1- Sample of MBM (31.03)

MBM entries (real-time, online text snippets comprised of a few short sentences) typically focus on a specific moment of a football match, with longer entries describing exciting or important events. The page is regularly and automatically updated with new entries appearing at the top of the page. Major events (kick-off, goals, penalties, yellow/red cards, substitutions etc.) are identified with a small graphic and upper case
letters while text describing goals are highlighted with blue. These graphical and orthographical methods are likely a means to facilitate readers’ ability to scan what can be a lengthy page and find key events.

The unmarked text entries are those of the author (a BBC journalist) and form the main commentary which is supplemented by comments from other BBC correspondents. Readers submit contributions on Twitter via the #bbcfootball hashtag or by text message.

**Literature Review**

**Sports Commentary**

Ferguson (1983, p. 154) describes sports commentary as a “highly structured and well recognized genre”. Mainly focusing on radio commentary of baseball, he lists 6 key features of what he terms “Sports Announcer Talk” (the language used by professional sports commentators) which include simplification, inversions, use of modifiers, routines, result expressions and tense usage. He identifies the use of present simple and present progressive to describe live action as the most important features.

Beard (1998, p. 61) notes that sports commentary is “unscripted, spontaneous talk aiming to capture the on-going excitement of the event”. He writes of the importance of specialised language in sports commentary and states that such language “can act as a bond, a mutual link between those who play, those who commentate and to an extent those who watch” (1998, p. 63). Beard also states that present simple is the most common structure used to describe action.

Muller (2007) studies the use of time, tense and aspect in radio commentary of English and German football matches. The data examined indicates that for live coverage, present simple and present progressive are the most common structures, largely mirroring the findings of Ferguson and Beard. However, when instant replays are being referred to, the narration moves to past simple or, less frequently, present perfect.

**MBM**

MBM seems to be an area that has received little attention from the research community, possibly as it is a relatively new genre. The author knows of only 3 published studies that examine the topic. Sandvoss (2004) examines the area from the
perspective of globalization but offers few insights into the linguistic features of the genre.

Chovanec (2006) examines the nature of interaction of MBM commentary on website of the UK newspaper The Guardian and states that MBM pages “provide a forum for mutual interaction by means of pseudo-dialogical conversational exchanges” (2006, p. 26). It is argued that the interaction mainly takes the form of competitive discourse and Chovanec views this competitive element as typical of male discourse and gossip in general.

In a second article (Chovanec, 2009) he surveys the linguistic elements of MBM, again relying on The Guardian’s MBM feed. The main finding is that MBM “stands at the intersection of orality and literacy” (2009, p. 115) and shows several patterns emblematic of spoken language including lexical items (slang, expletives), grammatical structures (rhetorical questions, imperatives) and discourse-level pragmatics (terms of address).

Community

Swales (1990, p. 24-27) lists 6 characteristics of what he terms “discourse communities”. They are:

1) Agreed set of goals
2) Means of communication for members
3) “Uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback”
4) Community-specific genre
5) Specialized lexis
6) “Threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discoursal expertise”

This framework will provide the basis of analysis that follows.
Research Questions and Methodology

Research Questions

1) Does MBM fit Swales’ (1990) discourse community framework?
2) What are the predominant patterns of tense, time and aspect in MBM reporting on major incidents and how do they compare to TV or radio commentary?
3) How does the proposed existence of a discourse community manifest itself through interaction?

Corpus and Methods

The corpus assembled for this study (Appendix) comprises of 6 “Saturday Football” pages from the BBC as Saturday is the busiest day of the football calendar and features a number of concurrent English Premier League matches. The corpus is 101,138 words over 51.5 hours. The corpus was analysed using AntConc concordance software (Anthony, 2011).

Results

MBM as a Discourse Community

As Swales’ work focused largely on academic research communities, it may seem inappropriate to apply the model to sports, but Swales himself used a stamp collecting group as an example of a discourse community (Swales, 1990). All 6 features identified by Swales (agreed goals, a method for intra group communication, a specific genre, specialize lexis and the notion that membership is somewhat exclusive) can be seen within the BBC MBM page.

The goal of the genre is to follow association football but to do so in a unique and interactive manner. It thus occupies a niche in an area already saturated with media coverage. The degree to which that goal is agreed on by all parties is slightly difficult to ascertain, but as humour and off-topic discussions are included and encouraged (see below), there seems to be an implicit agreement between the participants as to the overall goal. Readers would not contribute to the MBM if they did not agree with the goal (however vague) and, as is shown below, interaction is an important aspect of the MBM.

Writing in 1990, Swales could not have predicted the rapid rise of the Internet, computer mediated communication (CMC) and social networks. The second, third and fourth features can almost be treated as one in this case: the continued existence of the
MBM page is at the same time how the members communicate, the mechanism for data (match facts) and feedback (interaction) and as a whole forms a genre in its own right. The nature of this interaction and grammatical features of the genre are analyzed below.

Specialized lexis, the fifth feature, is one of the most salient features of the community. Entries such as the following are loaded with specialised terms and are unlikely to be fully understood by a casual reader, particularly if there is no visual context.

Goals like this **send you down**. Blackburn have all sorts of chances to clear this ball but don't. A **corner** is half **cleared**, Yakubu has plenty of time to get it away but dawdles and is **robbed** by Chris Brunt. He **swings in a better of a cross** from the right which Grant Hanley somehow doesn't **head away**. The ball ends up at Marc-Antoine Fortune's feet, and he **drills in** from four yards. (07.04) [emphasis added]

To choose a single example, the phrase “send you down” refers to the relegation and promotion system in European football in which the worst performing teams in each league fall to a lower division and are replaced by the best performing teams from that lower division. The author states that the (perceived) poor level of defending could lead to the team being relegated. Those not familiar with this convention would likely either not understand the phrase or, possibly misinterpret it to mean “lose the current game”.

As regards the sixth condition, while Swales’ description seems to imply some manner of formal membership, there are no such conditions for the MBM. However, the author of the MBM acts as a gatekeeper and includes reader comments based on their insight or entertainment value. It seems reasonable to assume that uninformed comments are unlikely to be added to the page, thus suggesting that the inclusion of a comment signifies an implicit positive valuation of its worth. Therefore as not every comment can be accepted and only those that meet certain qualities are included, notions of threshold and expertise could be applied.

In order to better understand how MBM can be considered a discourse community, an aspect of genre will be examined as well as they ways in which the existence of this community is evident from empirical data.
Genre Features- Time, Tense and Aspect

The third condition of Swales’ framework is that of genre. If genre is taken to mean “a text whose form and use characterizes a particular type” (Fasold and Connor-Lipton, 2006, p. 502), MBM clearly fits this definition. One feature of the genre is the use of time, tense and aspect in its reporting.

In a sense, MBM is the ideal medium for professional commentators: the lowered degree of time pressure allows authors to benefit from instant replays and perhaps even radio or TV commentary of the match to create accurate, highly descriptive sentences that attempt to maintain the excitement of the spectacle. To determine the main grammatical structures used in MBM, keyword searches were performed relating to major incidents in the games and those samples examined for use of time, tense and aspect. Major incidents are: goals (105), yellow and red cards (19 and 4 respectively) and the awarding of a penalty kick (6).

94% of incidents are described using present simple, as in the following examples:

GOAL
Liverpool finally find a way through for a deserved equaliser. Steven Gerrard’s cross is headed on by substitute Daniel Agger, it hits the post and Luis Suarez is there to nod in from point-blank range. (7.04) [emphasis added]
PENALTY Wigan
Martin Skrtel's high foot on Victor Moses gives Wigan a golden opportunity to open the scoring at Anfield. (24.03) [emphasis added]

However, when circumstances surrounding the incident are included in the description, other time references are used. This is a relatively common practice, occurring in 57% of all cases.
Table 1: Use of Present Simple in Major Incidents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incident</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
<th>Present simple to describe action</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Other time references used for context</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Card</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Card</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penalty</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A variety of time references are used to establish context around major incidents. As shown in Table 2, the most common are present simple and present perfect and they will be examined in more detail.

Table 2: Time/Tense/Aspect Used in Major Incidents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Simple Past</th>
<th>Present Perfect</th>
<th>Present Progressive</th>
<th>Past Perfect</th>
<th>Will Future</th>
<th>Present Perfect Progressive</th>
<th>Past Progressive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The simple past seems to be used to provide immediate background to major incidents and has an evaluative function. In the following example, the author describes the incident first with the simple present and then establishes background with the simple past.

GOAL

Controversy alert: Raul Meireles puts the ball back in to the box where Branislav Ivanovic volleys in from close range. Cool finish from the Serbian - the only problem is he was at least two yards offside. (7.04) [emphasis added]

Another entry shows two uses of simple past, first to evaluate the impact of the event and secondly to review the incident:
RED CARD

QPR's job just got even tougher as Djibril Cisse allows the ball to get away from him before flying two-footed through Fraizer Campbell. It was a reckless, dangerous lunge and it's a straight red. (24.03) [emphasis added]

The present perfect is mainly used to describe the state of the game up to the point of an event or an individual player’s contributions. In both cases, the established pattern of using present simple to describe the main incident remains.

GOAL

Arsenal have bossed this game since the break but they are behind again when a spinning ball foxes Thomas Vermaelen and allows Jamie Mackie to barge into the box and pull the ball back for Samba Diakite to smash his first-time finish into the net for his first QPR goal. (31.03) [emphasis added]

RED CARD

He has scored twice but his afternoon will end in shame as Grant Holt receives a second yellow for a reckless tackle on Michael Kightly. (24.03) [emphasis added]

Despite the time delay of the medium, these findings indicate that MBM commentary largely follows the patterns of time, tense and aspect in radio and TV commentary noted by Muller, Ferguson and Beard, particularly as regards the use of simple present tense. The use of simple present with past reference is a known feature of English and is seen as a means through which speakers or writers “create a sense of immediacy and to suggest that past events are unfolding at the moment of speaking or writing” (Carter and McCarthy, 2006, p. 625). The frequency of its use is a clear feature of the MBM genre as seen on the BBC page.

Other Elements of Community

Communities do not exist solely in the ether nor can they be identified only by their linguistic characteristics. It is a broad notion and other features that are not specifically related to Swales’ concept of discourse community can be seen in MBM. In this corpus, it manifests itself through general interaction and the uses of humour and complaining.

Interaction is the main way in which community is evident on the MBM page. The corpus contains 399 comments via Twitter and 67 text messages, averaging one
contribution every 6.6 minutes. While this is not a high degree of interactivity, the interaction in MBM is a complement to updates concerning the matches, the primary focus of the genre.

A call for contributions is a common feature of the MBM genre and occurs early in the coverage:

GET INVOLVED

As ever, we are nothing without your contributions, so let's have them. Can Spurs pick up a win? Will Liverpool or Villa manage a goal between them? Are Southampton going up? Can Anchorman 2 possibly be a patch on the original?

Let us know on Twitter, using the hashtag #BBCFootball, Tweet me at @TJRostance, or text in on 81111... For just one day let's not be co-texters. Let's be co-people. (07.04)

The author in this case suggests specific topics for comment, but the tone in which he does so along with the reference to a film entirely unrelated to football essentially leave the choice of what to discuss to the readers and speaks to the informal nature of the expected interaction.

The majority of contributions are spontaneous remarks, however there are also 57 matches for Re (marking the comment as a response to a previous entry) in the corpus, which signifies a degree of nearly synchronous interaction. Re Comments are made in regards to events in the game(s):

James Welham on Twitter: "Re the Baines handball - it was identical to what Adebayor had a goal disallowed for against Man Utd. Awful consistency."
(10.03)

Replying to questions from author:

From Toffee Dan: "Re 1137. Everton to win 1-0, Spurs 2-0, Chelsea 2-1, Liverpool - in a replay 1-0 after 0-0. Everton and Liverpool kept apart in semis."
(17.03)

Other contributors:

From Marcus Parry on Twitter: "Re Jack (1832): Context, my friend. In the context of the game it's a great result. In the context of the season it's an awful one." (17.03)
These examples show that information exchange is not solely one way and that feedback, a feature noted by Swales, is an important element of the MBM community.

Another example is humour. Fine and de Soucey (2005, p. 2) argue that “a salient part of this culture—found in almost every group—is a set of repeated humorous and joking references” and that joking is a means through which communities form and strengthen. They state that joking in such groups has three qualities: it is embedded and generally only occurs between parties who know each other, it is interactive and requires reciprocity, and refers to common knowledge between the participants. The nature of MBM and CMC in general raise several issues in terms of the embedded nature of this humour or the relationship between its participants, but the following exchange clearly demonstrates the second and third features:

Oh my word - this would have broken the internet for good. TONY HIBBERT ALMOST SCORES! The full-back puts in a cross which strikes the bar and falls to Tim Cahill, who can only prod at John Ruddy with the goal gaping. Imagine that. Hibbert scoring...

The initial comment is highly referential and those outside the community would not understand why the idea of the player in question scoring is worthy of such hyperbole. Those to whom the reference is clear (who know that Tony Hibbert has never scored in his professional career) understand the reference and therefore can claim membership. Additionally, a reader not only replies, fulfilling the interaction function, but also carries the theme further, another aspect of group humour noted by Fine and de Soucey (2005).

Ian on Twitter: "Broken the Internet? Tony Hibbert scoring will be the first sign that the apocalypse is upon us!" (07.03)

A final sign of community in MBM is the inclusion of complaints from both the author and the readers. Liinamaa argues that complaining is an aspect of community and that it
…is a social form that tends to seek out agreement rather than tension or conflict (you complain to be agreed with, not to be proven wrong)….complaining is a way to cultivate belonging and create community (Liinamaa, 2009, p. 132).

Often instigated by the author, complaining is an important feature of MBM commentary. Chovanec (2006) sees it as an intentional act designed to bridge the gap between author and reader. It could also be seen as a means for the author to fill the equivalent of dead air: in the absence of action in a match, the author comments on the lack of action as in this sample:

If referee Chris Foy was a vet he'd do the humane thing and put this one out of its misery but on we go. (07.04)

In this case, the author’s views are quickly echoed by a reader who legitimizes his comment (though it must be noted that the author’s inclusion of this comment could be seen as him using his gatekeeping function to exclude contrasting views and maintain his control of the agenda).

Rob on Twitter: "We now know Sandro's gum shield is to stop him grinding his teeth when he falls asleep during dull matches.” (07.04)

Interestingly, this reply builds on an earlier remark from another reader (Jonathan Brook on Twitter: "The only intrigue at the Stadium of Light is around why Sandro continues to use that gum shield." (07.04)) which again shows the group nature of interaction on this MBM.

The data examined in this corpus strongly suggests that MBM has elements of a discourse community and that its bonds are expressed in various forms of interaction.

**Learning Applications**

Due to the aforementioned popularity of football, there are some clear opportunities for use of MBM as a learning tool. If students can combine their interests with language learning, there are potential benefits for motivation and engagement. Despite its immense popularity, not all students are interested in football and to use MBM material in class carries with it the very real possibility of alienating those who are
not fans of the sport. Thus, the best learning applications of MBM may be for project, individual or any other kind of self-directed or optional work. This type of work may appeal to self-directed learners and could also play a role in developing learning autonomy.

The greatest assets of MBM are that, like so many other on-line resources, it is free, easily accessible, authentic and limited in scope and topic. Access is a key feature-the format is well-suited for smart phones and tablets (vertical scrolling) and the content is easily accessed via either traditional webpages or through smart phone applications, both free of charge and not requiring any registration. MBM is largely written by and for native speakers and while this presents its own challenges, the authenticity, as well as the delivery of commentary in chunks (often two or three sentences per entry), surely alleviate some of those concerns. In terms of scope, as noted, in addition to the multi-game format studied above, many games receive their own dedicated MBM and this type of coverage is perhaps best for the learning applications proposed below.

Perhaps the easiest way in which learners can use MBM to develop their skills is framing it as a supplementary second language commentary. Students can be instructed to watch a match as they usually would and to read the MBM after the game. Despite the fact that MBM is likely designed with providing live updates to those not able to watch the game, it would seem best for students to initially view the game in question. Having seen the events described in the game will form a framework onto which they can graft the language from the MBM. This could ease student frustration with potentially difficult material (particularly specialized lexis). Students can be asked to keep a vocabulary journal of new terms they learn from reading the MBM as a form of assessment should teachers wish to make MBM an option for mandatory outside of class study or self-directed project work.

An end result could be having students write their own MBM. It is important to note again here that MBM is not limited to football or even sports. Various events-news, politics, entertainment, even weather-have some kind of MBM coverage, though clearly this is limited by the fact that they are less frequent than sports and in some cases unscheduled. If several students are involved, they can co-ordinate by using a special hashtag and post their updates on Twitter. A unique hashtag has the additional benefit of
allowing for teachers and other students to monitor, comment on and contribute to the task.

MBM can also been seen as a bridge to two other related language learning activities. First, it has the potential to scaffold students who wish to listen to authentic L2 audio commentary of live sports. Knowing some of the specialised lexis, idioms and conventions used in sports broadcasting will ease the transition into the time pressure of listening to audio commentary. Secondly, MBM might function as a means for students to become more involved in social networking. Hashtags and emails are the main ways in which members of the MBM community communicate and this is a low-risk, low-pressure means for students to feel part of a discussion in an L2. If several students are using MBMs at the same time, there could be a contest to have the first contribution highlighted or included in an MBM.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

Any of the aspects of MBM briefly surveyed here deserve more detailed examination. One possibility would be for comparative studies between two different MBMs or between TV commentary and MBM for the same match. Various other frameworks such as Community of Practice (Wenger, 1988) or CMC would also likely provide valuable insights into the area. Finally, assessing student reaction to and participation in any of the suggested learning applications would be of value to educators hoping to either include or recommend MBM as a tool for learners.
References


Appendix

MBM Corpus

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Words</th>
<th>URL</th>
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<tbody>
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Total: 101 138 words, 3090 minutes (51.5 hours)