



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

## LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE OF SPORTS USED ON FACEBOOK CHATS BY NIGERIAN FOOTBALL SUPPORTERS

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Article Received:16/01/2021

Article Accepted: 27/02/2021

Published online:11/03/2021

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.9.1.160](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.9.1.160)

### Abstract

This study investigated the language of sports used on Facebook chats by Nigerian football supporters. The study set out to identify and discuss the literal and contextual meaning of lexis and structures that are solely used in the game of soccer, using Dirk Geeraert's (2009) theory of lexical semantics. The design of the study was a descriptive survey. The corpus for the study comprised five (5) Facebook chats and twenty five (25) Facebook sub-chats which were coded Utterances 1-25 (U<sup>1</sup> to U<sup>25</sup>). These chats and sub-chats were extracted from four (4) Facebook groups/platforms. The chats were analyzed using the principles of Geeraert's (2009) theory of lexical semantics. It was found that Nigerian football supporters deployed words and phrases that were peculiarly used in the domain of sports to socially interact on Facebook. These words and phrases, however, could only be interpreted through contexts. It was concluded that Facebook chats of Nigerian football supporters are preponderant with the register of sports (soccer) which could only be used and understood by football fans. The study suggested that further studies should be conducted on the language of sports used on Facebook chats by Nigerian football supporters using Halliday's theory of language register.

**Keywords:** language register, football texts, lexical semantics, Facebook chats, football supporters

### Introduction

Language is a tool humans deploy in the expression of thoughts, feelings, ideas and philosophy in various socio-cultural contexts. This explains why Sapir (1921) views language as a purely human phenomenon in his famous definition of language. According to him, language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols.

The importance of language in human communication, therefore, cannot be overemphasized because humans use language in all spheres of life to interact. Kadiri and Ekwueme (2020) opine that the primary purpose of language is communication. People converse interactively by the means of language. 'Conversation', in a layman's understanding, refers to as the exchange of idea or opinion between two or more people usually through talk. Ten Have (1999, p. 4) adds that

conversation does not happen in a vacuum; it happens in a situation where conversational participants interact with one another through talk, irrespective of its goals.

People talk about politics, analyze sports, transact business, preach the gospel, teach pupils in schools, carryout political campaign, socialize with friends and family, etc. through the instrumentality of language. This means that language serves very many functions to different people at different times. In other words, people use language differently in different environments to solve societal problems. Language varies “according to its uses as well as its users, where it is used and to whom, and who is using it” (Holmes, 2007, p. 235). For example, the language of legal profession is unique to the profession and different from the language of Medicine. It is like say that the language of sermon in churches is peculiar to churches and different from the language of political campaigns. It is on this basis that Chukwudile (2020) argues that language plays important functions in all disciplines, some of which are Education, Legal studies, Psychology, Medicine, Sports, Media, Arts and Literature.

Based on Chukwudile’s submission, we can argue that language is used to serve specific purposes because each community of language users deploy the registers or jargons associated to their particular field in order to create solidarity with colleagues and to also distance themselves from nonmembers. This unique or personal use of language by these communities of users is what Fromkin and Rodman (1998) refer to as stylistics. Simpson (2004) defines stylistics as a method of textual interpretation which the primacy of place is assigned to language. More liberally, stylistics denotes the study of style. Style, in itself, is a relative term that stands for a way and manner of doing things. Austin (1962), in his book titled *How to Things with Words*, argues that we could actually do things with words. The speech acts, therefore, constitute style because of the linguistic choices involved.

Stylistics and language registers are synonymous terms which are sometimes used

interchangeably. However, registers are levels of formality used when speaking and writing. According to Nurani (2014), register is identified as a variety according to its use. Halliday (1989, p. 411) adds that it is “what you are speaking at the time, depending on what you are doing and the nature of the activity in which the language is functioning”. Register thus refers to an arrangement of words and phrases that is typically associated with a specific situational arrangement of the field, the tenor and the mode of discourse (Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Hasan, 1989). The term register refers to specific lexical and grammatical choices as made by speakers depending on the situational context, the participants of a conversation and the function of the language in the discourse (Halliday 1989, p. 44). Halliday further stated that there are two main types of variation in language, social and functional. Dialects are characterized by social or regional variation, whereas register concerns functional variation. However, these two notions are not entirely independent of each other. Hudson (1993, p. 51) states that “one man’s dialect is another man’s register”; that is linguistic features which are part of one speaker’s dialect might belong to a specific register for another speaker. Fromkin and Rodman (1998) view registers as a stylistic variant of a language appropriate for a particular social setting. Hidayah (2018) adds that language has to be appropriate to the speaker and listener and it also must match appropriately with occasions and situations of use. So the relationship between stylistics and registers is closely knitted. Leech and Short (2007) would call this relationship a pole of the same continuum as it is with lexicon and grammar used in their famous stylistic checklist.

In a different development, sports had in the recent past and even currently kept the world fully entertained. Youths all over the world have genuine love for sports and sports related activities. Many studies had shown that Nigerians youths have stronger passions for sports, especially the game of soccer. Tansey (2013) explains that one thing that makes the game of soccer interesting is the passion that is associated with it. According to Tansey, football fans exercise the same passion for the game irrespective of where they are; whether in the field

of play, viewing centers, online soccer platforms, homes etc. This passion, to a large extent, is expressed through the instrumentality of language. This is made manifest in the kinds of debates/arguments Nigerian football fans engage in before, during and after live matches. The debates could be online or offline. These fans virtually debate on anything and everything concerning football, especially as it is related to the match being played. For example, fans, sometimes, argue for or against who the best player is; the best goal keeper, the best or the worst midfielder, the best or the worst coach; the player with the highest number of goals; the best or worst signing of the year; the list could go on and on. Football debates/arguments seem to be the main reason why some fans love the game of football and other football related events. Truthfully, some fans would prefer to engage in hot debates either online or offline during live matches on match-days, to actually watching or seeing these games. It is observed that the linguistic choices deployed during each debate represent the language of sports in its real sense. In other words, fans carefully choose words that are used in the domain of sports to support their points of argument. So as important as this discourse is in the world of sports (soccer), much attention has not been given to the language (registers) of sports used on Facebook chats by Nigerians sports fans. This study, therefore, does an in depth linguistic analysis of language of sports used on Facebook chats, thereby filling this gap and contributing to scholarship.

### Statement of the Problem

Research in the language of sports is as old as sports itself because the discourse has, over the years, attracted the attentions of many language scholars who examined the discourse, stylistic and the pragmatic structures of sports language in print and electronic media. Some of the scholars equally investigated the nature and structure of sports announcer talks on television; while some looked at the conversational strategies in sports texts to unravel how turns are constructed and allocated to speakers during talks. Despite this huge scholarship, in what seems like a deliberate attempt to exclude research on sports registers on Facebook chats, no

scholar, to the best of my knowledge, has investigated the language of sports (registers) used on Facebook chats by Nigerian football supporters. The current study, therefore, is devoted to do that thereby, filling that gap.

### Aim and Objectives

The aim of the study is to analyze the language of sports used on Facebook chats by Nigerian football supporters. Other specific objectives include:

- i. To identify lexical and structural linguistic features that are peculiar to game of soccer as they are used on Facebook chats by Nigerian football supporters.
- ii. To discuss their literal and contextual meaning using Dirk Geeraert's (2009) theory of lexical semantics.
- iii. To establish how these linguistic choices help to facilitate communication amongst the supporters

### Scope

The language of sports or sports register is a general term that connotes all the terms and terminologies used in the domain of sports. This study may not be able to cover all of these because of its large scope. So the study is only delimited to the language used in the game of soccer or what is popularly known as football. In other words, we only analyzed the language of sports supporters (fans) used on Facebook chats. Secondly, any other form of linguistic investigation other than register analysis of football language is not covered in this study.

### Studies on Language of Sports

Olagunju (2019) investigated the discourse analysis of football text using Ansary and Babai's (2005) Generic Structure Potential. The paper aimed at unmasking the discourse structure of football texts in newspapers and its contextual configuration. Thirty (30) lead articles were selected for the period of one month in *Complete Sports* during the 2010 world cup. It was found that the analysis of discourse structure has the potential to enhance rhetorical awareness of sport discourse and textual organizational skills. Differently, Balzer-Siber (2015) examined the functional stylistic features of

television sports announcer in Major League soccer broadcast using discourse analytic approach. The study sought to establish whether the linguistic features in the text fulfill communicative functions or they are just used for stylistic embellishment. The results showed that the linguistic and stylistic features deployed in the text include: simplification, subject-dependent inversion, result expression, heavy modifier, diminutive elements, deictic adverbs, discourse deixis, and floor taking strategy. Balzer-Siber concluded that that the changes in viewership might not spur a reconsideration of the reduplication network, and so it is worth monitoring the development in sports announcer interactions. Similarly, Georgalou (2009) did a paper on discursive analytic study of sport commentaries of 2004 Euro tournament. The paper sought to uncover how players, their head coaches and their fans (national representatives) were depicted through language. The paper was anchored on discourse-historical framework. The results showed that the sportcasters show a tremendous support for home players and their head coaches thereby creating identification points with the fans. It was concluded that the media sport has the ideological power in disseminating, generating and reinforcing national identities. The present study is, therefore, related to the ones reviewed above in that they are all centred on football texts. However, the point of departure between them is that while the other studies looked at discourse and stylistic analyses of football texts or commentaries; the present study investigated the language of sports (registers) used on Facebook chats by Nigerian football supporters.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on Dirk Geeraert's (2009) theory of lexical semantics. This theory is a subfield of linguistic semantics which looks at how the meaning of the lexical units correlates with the structure of the language. Geeraert views it as a theory which is concerned with the systematic study of word meanings. The two most fundamental questions addressed by lexical semanticists are: (a) how to describe the meanings of words, and (b) how to account for the variability of meaning from context to context. These two are necessarily connected, since an adequate description of

meaning must be able to support our account of variation and our ability to interpret it. Descriptively speaking, Geeraert (2017) explains that the main topics studied within lexical semantics involve either the internal semantic structure of words, or the semantic relations that occur within the vocabulary. Within the first set, major phenomena include polysemy contrast with vagueness, metonymy, metaphor, and proto-typicality. Within the second set, dominant topics include lexical fields, lexical relations, conceptual metaphor and metonymy, and frames.

In addition, Caplan (1987) summarily says that lexical semantics involves the coding of word meanings. All these arguments bring to the fore the role lexical semantics plays in describing lexical and structural features of language in context. This theory is appropriate for this study because the theory of lexical semantics is a theory that thrives well in the analysis of word and phrase meaning in communicative discourses through context. Since we are looking at registers of sports, the theory would assist us in driving our analysis.

### **Methodology**

The present study employs a qualitative descriptive survey. A survey is a design in which a group of people or item is studied by collecting and analyzing data from only a few people or item considered to be representative of the entire group (Nwargu 2015). The data for the study comprised five (5) Facebook chats and twenty five (25) Facebook sub-chats which were coded Utterances 1-25 (U<sup>1</sup> to U<sup>25</sup>). These chats and sub-chats were extracted from four (4) Facebook groups/platforms. The platforms were Chelsea supporters group, Manchester United supporters group, Manchester City supporters group and Arsenal supporters groups. These Facebook groups were selected because they are the groups that have the highest number of fan or supporters in Nigeria both online and offline. Twenty five (25) sub-chats were purposively screenshot and the linguistic features associated with the language of sports were identified, coded and analyzed in accordance with the principles of Geeraert's (2015) theory of lexical semantics.

## Data Presentation and Discussions

### Chat 1

U<sup>1</sup>: If I allow you, you would say that Tammy Abraham is better than Marcus Rashford.

U<sup>2</sup>: For now, for now... don't even argue now...yes, he used to play...for now, Abraham is better **forward** than Rashford. He can make good **runs** and creates better **opportunities**

U<sup>3</sup>: Abraham is better than Rashford. In his last match against Burnley, he scored a **hat-trick**

U<sup>4</sup>: Yeah, having more goals doesn't mean he is better than Rashford. Rashford also scored a **brace** against Newcastle and he had one **assist** to his name.

In chat, U<sup>1</sup>, the interlocutor sought to know if U<sup>2</sup> would confirm that Abraham plays better attacking football than Rashford. U<sup>2</sup> in his reaction pointed out that Abraham does. It is observed that U<sup>2</sup> carefully selected the words 'better forward', 'good runs' and better 'opportunities' to describe the attacker. Similarly, U<sup>3</sup> and U<sup>4</sup> used the words 'hat-trick' and 'brace' to describe the kind of goals Abraham and Rashford scored in the previous matches, respectively. The words or terminologies used by these interlocutors are predominantly used in game of soccer. This therefore suggests that through this register, they were able to communicate effectively in perfect solidarity. The word 'forward', in this context, connotes a footballer whose role is to score goals. The near or the far antonym of the word 'forward' cannot be said to be 'backward' 'posterior' or 'regress' because of the context of use but in the context of this chat, the word 'defender' stands a better chance of being chosen. In its most literal sense, the 'forward' could mean towards the front or at the front, not really a footballer playing an attacking football. Again, the word 'run' in the context of the chat does not mean to move forward quickly upon two feet by alternately making short jump off either foot. The word is used to describe a run made by a player without the ball in order to lure defenders away from the ball carrier. Since the word is used and understood by interlocutors, we can say that they are in the language class. The word 'opportunities' is a word used in football to explain the high chances

of scoring goals. It is observed that the word is also used in other domain of language to mean a chance for advancement, progress or profit but what makes it different from the one used in the context of football is that whenever someone talks about opportunities, he or she is talking about good chances of scoring goals. More so, the words 'hat-trick' and 'brace' are terms exclusively used in the game of soccer. No wonder Halliday (1990) calls them the restricted or closed registers because they have a number of possible meanings that are fixed and finite and may be quite small. Hat-trick connotes scoring three goals in a match, while brace means scoring two. In Chat 1, U<sup>1</sup> to U<sup>4</sup>, the interlocutors' choice of words and expressions reflects those particularly used in the game of soccer; although some of these words are used in other domains. Supporting this submission, Biber and Conrad (2009) argue that pervasive linguistic features are not exclusively unique of a given register, they might occur in any other variety; however, they are "much more common in the target register.

### Chat 2

U<sup>5</sup>: The guy is very skilful, his **dummy runs** are superb, his **clapping** is excellent.

U<sup>6</sup>: you mean Mahrez?

U<sup>7</sup>: Mahrez. He is in good **form**.

U<sup>8</sup>: The guy is good. He has even got **goal on target**.

U<sup>9</sup>: was he not the one that scored against Nigeria?]

U<sup>10</sup>: hahaha...Yes, he was. He is a good **attacker**, sometimes he plays from the **left wing**.

In chat 2, U<sup>5</sup> to U<sup>10</sup>, the interlocutors deployed some football terminologies to discuss the progress Mahrez had made in the recent times. The words and phrases deployed include 'clapping', 'in good form', 'on target', and 'left wing'. First, the word 'clapping' in this sense, does not mean the act of striking the palms of the hand. It is a dribbling skill that allows the player to pull the ball backwards with one foot and hit it forward with the other. The word 'clapping' is used mostly in an informal football conversation. However, the interlocutors are bound to understand the social implication of using it. The phrase 'on target' is a more general term that is used



in very many domains of language of use. For example, the military use the phrase to describe the precision of shoots; business men use the phrase to state that the sales are good. However, in football, it signifies any goal attempt that goes into the net regardless of the intent. The phrase 'off target' stands as the direct antonym of the phrase. To understand this phrase, one needs contextual cues such as the topic, speaker, environments etc. Differently, the word 'wing' is a word which literally denotes an appendage of an animals' (bird, insect, bat) body that enables it to fly. The phrase 'left wing', as used by U<sup>8</sup>, refers to any offensive player who plays on the left side of the field. The phrase synonymous is with the phrase is 'left flank' and it is also the opposite of the phrase the 'the right wing'. Lastly, the word 'form' is a polysemic word that means so many things. For example, form is the shape or visible structure of something or person; it is a thing that gives shape to other things, etc. But the prepositional phrase "in good form" suggests that Mahrez's current level of performance in the game is exceptional.

### Chat 3

U<sup>11</sup>: Lampard shouldn't have **benched** Keppa for long. The guy is good but he needs more **time**.

U<sup>12</sup>: He was... but not now, he is completely **out of form**.

U<sup>13</sup>: Keppa had made many dangerous **saves** more than many goalkeepers this season.

U<sup>14</sup>: Yes... he had equally **conceded more goals** because he has failed to keep **clean sheets**

U<sup>15</sup>: hahahahah...

In chat 3, U<sup>11</sup> to U<sup>14</sup>, the participants used the terms 'benched', 'out of form', 'saves' 'conceded' and 'clean sheets' to describe the recent performance of Keppa, the first choice Chelsea goalkeeper. The word 'benched' is a verbal item used in the context of sports to express the resting of a player because of injuries or bad form. The word 'bench' can also be used in legal profession to mean people who decide on verdicts. It can as well mean a long seat with or without a back, found for example in parks and schools. The speaker in U<sup>11</sup> selected and

used this word with the assurance that the person being addressed would understand. More so, prepositional phrase "out of formed used in U<sup>12</sup>, is used to mean that the performance of the player in question is abysmally low. It is the direct opposite of the phrase 'in form' and nearest in meaning to the phrase 'good performance'. In a similar way, the nominal item 'saves' as used in U<sup>13</sup>, is a term used to describe a goalkeeper's skill of stopping or preventing shots that would ordinarily score a goal. The term has a wide distribution of usages. For example, in medical parlance, it used to mean that the patient is no longer in any potential danger; it is used is Christendom to connote salvation; it is used in ordinary language or casual conversation to mean a person is free. The participants being addressed, however, understood the meaning of this word contextually. The word 'save' is directly opposite to the word 'concede' that is used by one of the participants in U<sup>14</sup>. Unlike what the word means in political terms, it used in sports to mean the number of goals scored against one's team. In other words, a conceded goal is called 'goal against'. Last but not the least, the word 'clean sheet' in this context, does not denote a piece of paper or clothe that is without any stain. However, it is used to describe the performance of a goalkeeper who, throughout a match, is able to stop all balls from going into his own net. In other words, a keeper who keeps a clean sheet is one whose opponent cannot score a goal throughout the duration of the match. Although the terms in U<sup>11</sup> to U<sup>14</sup> are not exclusively used in the game of soccer, they are, however, registers of sports. So, the participants showed some levels of mastering this particular register to be able to communicate effectively.

### Chat 4

U<sup>16</sup>: Our **defence is porous** and Lingard is not helping at all

U<sup>17</sup>: That one? He cannot **mark his opponent man to man**

U<sup>18</sup>: All he knows how to do best is **back pass and own goals**

U<sup>19</sup>: Yes... he got to learn the skill of **sweeping and sliding tackle**

U<sup>20</sup>: O yes...

The participants in chat 4, U<sup>16</sup> to U<sup>20</sup> deployed the terms 'porous defense', 'man to man marking', 'back pass', 'own goals', and 'sliding tackles' to discuss Lingard's poor defensive performance in recent times. However, their choice of vocabulary shows that they are familiar with the language of soccer. For example, the collocation/adjectival phrase 'porous defense' is a term used in the sports domain to describe a defense formation that is easily breakable. To demonstrate that U<sup>17</sup> understood what was said, he too used the term 'man-to-man marking' to lambast Lingard's inability to do so. Man-to-man marking is a form a defense that enables a defender to stay with is attacking opponent at all times. The terms 'back pass' and 'own goals' used by U<sup>18</sup> are also terms that are exclusively used in soccer. The former suggests moving the ball backwards toward his own half or net; while latter suggests scoring against your own self. The participants went further to state that Lingard doesn't deploy defensive strategies called 'sliding tackle'. Sliding tackle is a term used to describe an attempt made by a defender to take the ball away from the ball carrier by sliding on the ground feet-first into the ball. All these terms highlighted here are terms that used in the domain of soccer to explain soccer related activities.

#### Chat 5

U<sup>21</sup>: Arteta's **formation** in most matches look good

U<sup>22</sup>: He plays David Louis as a **sweeper** and Lacazette as his standing nine.

U<sup>23</sup>: This decision has made him go up the **table**

U<sup>24</sup>: Yes... and he always makes sure he wins at **home** and gets at least a **draw away**

U<sup>25</sup>: O yes... Nice one for the coach.

In another development, the participants in Chat 5, U<sup>21</sup> to U<sup>25</sup> carefully selected their words in full description of Mikel Arteta, the head coach of Arsenal football team and his wonderful and tactical performance this season. Some of the words deployed include: 'formation', 'sweeper', 'table', 'home', and 'away'. These terms are familiar terms used in every-conversation. However, in football

space, the terms share different meaning. For example, U<sup>21</sup> used the word 'formation' to describe how the players in a team generally position themselves on a pitch. So when U<sup>21</sup> was talking about Arteta's formation, other participants understood what he meant. The 'formation' spoken about in this context is neither that of the military nor the one in production. Context enabled the other participants to understand this. Context also enabled them to know that a 'sweeper' as it is used in U<sup>22</sup> is a free player in the line of defense who covers the marking defenders. A person who is not familiar with football terminologies would say that a sweeper is a person that sweeps floors or chimneys. Nurani (2014) would say only insiders (football fans) know the meaning of those terms. On the contrary, outsiders (common people) would find it difficult to understand the terms as they do not have sufficient knowledge about the meaning of those specialized terms. Same goes with the word 'table'. In a layman's words, a table is a piece of furniture with a top surface that accommodates a variety of uses. However, U<sup>23</sup> used the term to suggest a chart that shows the positions of various teams who have played some or all the matches in a season. Lastly, 'home and away' are terms used to describe the hosting team and the visiting team. The hosting team is said to 'home' because they are playing on their own pitch; while the visiting team is said to 'away' because they are not playing on their own pitch.

#### Conclusion

The interlocutors' choices of words and expressions, as we have seen in the Facebook chats above, are such that reflect the attentions and activities of the game of soccer. In other words, the interlocutors made use of words and expressions that are used solely and generally in the domain of soccer in each line of the chats. This prompted Keraf (2004) to say that "choice of words or diction is the ability to differentiate the meaning of ideas and to find out word which is proper with the situation, condition and feeling of the hearer" (p. 24) It is observed that twenty (25) words and expressions were deployed by these participants to discuss variety of topics. The meaning of these words and expression would have been vague if they were not

contextually interpreted. So, the importance of contexts in interpreting football discourse cannot be overemphasized. In a nutshell, we have been able to identify words and phrases that are associated to the game of soccer in Facebook chats of Nigerian football supporters. Secondly, we have also discussed the meaning of these words as they were contextually applied in the discourse using Geeraert's theory of lexical semantics. We found that Facebook chats of Nigerian football supporters are preponderant with the register of sports (soccer) which are used and understood via contexts. This study, therefore, contributes to scholarship in the area of data and theoretical framework. We recommend that scholars and researchers should conduct further studies on registers of sports on Facebook chats using Halliday's theory of language register (field, tenor and mode).

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