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Football is war: A case study of minute-by-minute football commentary

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ABSTRACT: The present investigation deals with the use of war-inspired terminology in live football commentary. As shown by a sample of written minute-by-minute match reports from Euro 2008, there is considerable conceptual transfer between the two domains, showing the validity of the master metaphor FOOTBALL IS WAR. It is argued that such metaphorical mapping combines with a body of intensifying vocabulary to build a war scenario whereby commentators add nerve and pace to their match coverage. This strategy is thought to transform the action on the pitch into something which is easier to understand, viz. physical conflict, thereby addressing consumers on a more basic and emotional level.

Keywords: football; commentary; war scenario; conceptual metaphor.

Introduction

In his essay “The Sporting Spirit” (1945), George Orwell argues that “sport is frankly mimic warfare” and that spectators “seriously believe – at any rate for short periods – that running, jumping and kicking a ball are tests of national virtue”. He claims, furthermore, that “[s]erious sport has nothing to do with fair play. It is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence: in other words, it is war minus the shooting”.

Published at the end of World War II, i.e. at a time when many countries were still in shock after the recent world-wide hostilities and atrocities, Orwell’s essay seems to pioneer the recognition of what has become an increasingly obvious parallel between two conceptual

domains in our minds, namely those of war and football (or soccer, as the sport is sometimes called). While, naturally enough, this parallel has interesting ramifications in many different disciplines and cultural contexts, its most noticeable effect is probably to be seen in the field of football, where both conceptualisation and linguistic expression often take a militaristic turn (e.g. Dankert 1969:123, Seddon 2004:25ff.). This is so in particular as commentators, pundits, journalists and others tend to depict the activities in and around the football pitch in terms of an informal war zone, sparked, arguably, by the resemblance between the two conceptual domains, and realized, typically, through the use of various forms of symbolic and dramatic language, including everything from clear-cut metaphorical expression to mere allusions to line-ups, strategies and general aggressive behaviour. In this capacity, the setting can be said to have grown out of the idea of an extensive war domain, resting firmly on Chapanga's (2004) observation, based on Lakoff (1991), that "soccer, like war, is a competitive sport where there is normally a clear winner and loser, strategic thinking, team work, preparedness, spectator behavior, glory of winning and shame of defeat".

In recent years, linguistic scholars have made recurrent note of the interesting cognitive parallel between military action and football, often discussed in terms of conceptual blending (cf. Fauconnier & Turner 2002). While some of them, for example Lakoff (1991), Kuiper & Scott Allan (1996) and Beard (1998), have pointed out the structural similarities between war and different sports in general, others have dealt specifically with football, for example Chapanga (2004), Seddon (2004) and Vierkant (2008), outlining and drawing on the associations that can be made between activities in the two conceptual domains, in particular those of a metaphorical kind. The following quotes provide relevant illustration:

"It has long been noted that we understand war as a competitive game like chess, or as a sport, like football or boxing. (Lakoff, 1991)

"The vocabulary of sport is often full of military metaphors. [...] The metaphors tend to draw on an interesting and limited set of domains." (Kuiper and Scott Allan, 1996:174)

"There is an undeniable theme of war in soccer. [...] The sport is a physical contest making it almost inevitable for allusions to war, metaphors of battle and strategy by professional commentators." (Chapanga, 2004)

"Metaphor seems to be an unavoidable issue when talking about football. Language about football is full of metaphors like "attack", "shot", "defence", "midfield", "enemy" or "battle". (Vierkant, 2008)

What these quotes say, basically, is not only that the game of football tends to be portrayed in terms of warfare, but also that the connection between war and football shows signs of having become "undeniable" and "unavoidable", so much in fact that our understanding of the game nowadays even depends on it. To illustrate this inherent principle, let us look briefly at some typical examples from British newspapers (as collected eclectically from the web in October 2008):

- (1) a. Liverpool *beat* Arsenal after titanic *battle*.
- b. Former *captain* David Beckham named in England *squad*.
- c. Wenger awaits United's *heavy artillery*.
- d. Evans to become first *casualty* of Manchester City *revolution*.

As can be seen from the italicised parts, these examples purport that the game of football can be seen as an event (a battle) which has active participants (captains and squads) trying to defeat each other (through beating) using weapons (heavy artillery) to bring about certain consequences (casualties – and perhaps even revolutions). In other words, by referring to just a handful of examples from ordinary newspapers, in themselves forming only the tiny tip of an iceberg when it comes to conceiving of the game in belligerent terms, we immediately sense the underlying war scenario on which these vivid football descriptions are built. And, more importantly, it would in fact be hard to imagine such football reporting without the use of war-inspired terminology of the type quoted, arguing for a situation where such expression in fact has become an indispensable verbal tool in the commentators' profession.

1. The present study

Based on cognitive metaphor theory (CMT) in the sense of Lakoff & Johnson (1980), the present investigation will capitalize on two of the ideas suggested above: on the one hand, that public football commentary is typically organised in accordance with the principles and parameters of warfare, and, on the other, that this strategy is more or less a prerequisite for the successful creation of a live media product today. This aim will be realized through a case study of football commentary as it occurs in a relatively recent and unexplored newspaper genre, namely written minute-by-minute match reports (MBMs) published live on the web. Drawing specifically on the electronic services provided by the British daily *The Guardian*, the material is limited, mainly for practical reasons, to the knockout stages of the international tournament Euro 2008, which was jointly hosted by Switzerland and Austria the same year. The following table shows the matches covered by the investigation.

leg	Teams	Date	word count
Quarter-final 1	Portugal-Germany	June 19	1 955
Quarter-final 2	Croatia-Turkey	June 20	3 792
Quarter-final 3	Holland-Russia	June 21	2 818
Quarter-final 4	Spain-Italy	June 22	3 246
Semi-final 1	Germany-Turkey	June 25	2 575
Semi-final 2	Russia-Spain	June 26	3 281
Final	Germany-Spain,	June 29	3 434

Table 1. MBM match reports included in the present study.

As can be easily calculated from these figures, the size of the downloaded material amounted to 21 101 words, or about 3 000 words per match commentary. The noted variation in word count is probably due to such factors as the length of the match (e.g. if it went into extra time), the character of the play (e.g. if it contained a lot of goal-scoring opportunities), and the idiosyncrasies of the commentator (e.g. his personal bent towards verbosity).

The next step was to analyse the dependent material with the aim of finding and collecting as many instances of war-like terminology as possible. Admittedly, this was not an altogether easy task, as there were many border-line cases to consider, in particular such more vaguely related to war and violence. In general, however, these tricky instances were resolved

through a combination of immediate context analysis and semi-arbitrary decision, a measure which eventually led to most of these words being included in the material. With this course of action, we can thus establish that the definition of war-like terminology applied here is on the liberal side, which in itself is only natural in a study concerned with the idea of an extensive war domain, with its somewhat fuzzy boundaries, rather than a strict inventory of metaphoric expression.

Further, as regards the MBM material itself, we may note that it makes up an interesting text type with partly its own characteristics. A product of recent developments in computer technology and an escalating media industry, it can be captured fairly well by the following set of descriptive statements. Accordingly, it can be conceived of as:

- a written genre
- informal and speech-based
- produced in real time
- semi-interactive
- published on the web
- a hybrid of oral commentary on radio/TV and written reports in newspapers

Hence, while those few scholars who have studied the structure of football commentary previously have typically focused either on post-match written coverage (e.g. Eriksson 1997, Crolley et al. 1998) or on live oral commentary (e.g. Chapanga 2004, Vierkant 2008), the present study takes a somewhat different stance in this context by dealing with an interesting crossbreed of these two media. As such, the material holds out the parallel prospects of putting this text type in perspective, while shedding some new light on its linguistic properties as manifested through the outlet of an online newspaper.

In theoretical terms, the study takes its starting-point in one of the conceptual master metaphors suggested by Lakoff & Johnson (1980), viz. that ARGUMENT IS WAR, subsequently refined in Lakoff (1991) to COMPETITION IS WAR (cf. the quote above). This metaphor is clearly suitable for further qualification in the context of football, specifically with reference to the suggested war framework: hence, it seems reasonable to use FOOTBALL IS WAR as the target conceptual metaphor here, with WAR functioning as the source domain and FOOTBALL as the target domain (cf. Nordin 2008:114). The motivation for proposing this metaphor is obviously that the demonstrated connection between war and football is due to a rather extensive conceptual similarity, and hence blending, between the two domains, as noted above.

With this framework in mind, the specific aims of the study can now be formulated as follows:

- To what extent is football conceptualized in terms of warfare in current MBM commentary?
- What particular aspects of the source domain are predominant?
- How can noted cases of war-inspired terminology be accounted for in this context?

2. Results

As regards the results of the present study, it may be appropriate to start by reporting some distributional figures from the analysis of the MBM data. Given the total word count of 21 101 words, the material turned out to contain 672 words which could be classified as relating somehow to the conceptual domain of war, indicating a rather high density of such expressions. Thus, to answer the first of the present research questions, the data supports the hypothesis that MBM football commentary is extensively conceptualized in terms of ideas and images relating to warfare and violence, apparently to the extent that nearly every 30th word in the MBMs was of this kind. Below some typical examples are listed of this crossover in vocabulary, with the target words given in italics:

- (2) a. Portugal continue to *attack* but Germany *defend* stoutly. (Portugal-Germany)
- b. It seems the *strategy* is to *pummel* the Russians into *submission*. (Holland-Russia)
- c. If Italy score now will it count as a *mercy killing* on the grounds that they will obviously *win* at *penalties* and this would be less *cruel*? (Spain-Italy)
- d. Russia *launch* a stirring *counterattack* but the final ball to Pavlyuchenko is overcooked. (Russia-Spain)
- e. Torres *beats* two *defenders* and *bashes* a *shot* at goal. (Spain-Italy)
- f. He might have been getting in *dangerous positions* but that's only half the *battle*. (Russia-Spain)
- g. Ramos *tumbles* under *pressure* from Chiellini, but they're *grappling* with each other. (Spain-Italy)

Apparently, then, these overall figures, including the cited examples, make a strong case for football being conceived of as a rather violent game, in essence supporting the Orwellian description of “mimic warfare”, at least as indicated by the present type of media material.

The next question to consider is what aspects of the war domain are predominant in this context. In order to achieve some kind of categorization here, an informal four-way distinction was introduced on the basis of the categorial and functional properties of the collected data, what can be called the A-word approach. This distinctive measure made it possible to divide the target terminology into four different groups of words, each with a general descriptive label beginning with the letter *a* according to the following system:

- agents (nouns – participants)
- actions (verbs – predicates)
- activities/states/results (nouns – situational circumstances)
- attributes (adjectives and adverbs – modifiers)

As can be seen, this classification provides superficial coverage of the main grammatical and semantic aspects of the words. While the categorial information is represented by the four open word classes, i.e. nouns, verbs, adjectives and (marginally) adverbs, the functional information is represented by the semantic notions of participants and predicates, as well as by the more syntactically oriented notions of situational circumstances and modifiers. As could be expected, however, the distribution of the data over these factors was not even or straightforward, nor was it uncomplicated to execute. For example, in view of the fact that nouns and verbs proved to be the dominant categories, it turned out that while the verbs by definition had the function of (semantic) predicates, the nouns were divided between

the roles of participants, activities and situational circumstances. In particular, one may note that the nouns classified as representing activities/states/results came to reflect a rather messy category, including words from both the core and the perimeter of the war domain, a situation which is also indicated by its rather complex name.

Now, if we collapse the collected instances of war terminology across the four A-categories, the following figures appear:¹

	agents	actions	activities	attributes	total
Portugal-Germany (Lutz)	3	46	21	4	74
Croatia-Turkey (Ashdown)*	11	56	44	13	124
Holland-Russia (Lutz)*	2	35	41	8	86
Spain-Italy (Ashdown)*	7	53	43	8	111
Germany-Turkey (Ashdown)	8	33	19	6	66
Russia-Spain (Ingle)	9	38	49	21	117
Germany-Spain (Murray)	6	45	38	5	94
Total	46	306	255	65	672

Table 2. Number of war-inspired expressions in the MBM match reports as a function of the four word categories identified.

No matter what particular aspect addressed, the data show that MBM football commentary contains a considerable share of war-inspired images conveyed through a range of linguistic expressions. Yet, the distribution is not even, as the summarized figures for the different columns indicate. It appears, rather, that there is a clear quantitative predominance for the conceptual mapping of actions and activities/states/results (45 and 38 per cent respectively), whereas the proportion for mappings of agents and attributes proper is much smaller (7 and 10 per cent respectively). As these distributional differences are of some interest in the present discussion, let us take a more detailed look at the four underlying categories of words, including also a set of typical examples from each of them.

Thus, in the agent category, which was the smallest one here, there were 46 instances of words describing the participants of the football game through various war-like concepts. While many of these words referred to individuals (i.e. the “soldiers” of the football pitch), there were also a number of collective nouns describing the two teams (i.e. the “armies” of the green battlefield), reflecting the fact that football is a team sport. The following table gives some examples of the mappings identified:

Army	contestant	striker
Brigade	defender	Squad
Captain	enemy	veteran
Cohort	guard	winner

Table 3. Examples of war-inspired agent words (nouns) in the present MBM material.

Apparently, these participant nouns echo aspects of military organisation as well as ongoing hostilities and post-war consequences, as in *captain* and *brigade*, *defender* and

¹ Incidentally, the names in parentheses stand for the reporting journalists in question, all of them males, while the stars indicate that three of the matches went into extra time (which sometimes means a lengthier commentary, but not always).

striker, and *winner* and *veteran*, respectively. Relatively few in number though they are, most of them form clearcut examples of metaphor, thus yielding some support to the idea that footballers are typically depicted through central concepts from the war domain.

As regards the category of action words, it was clearly the most prolific one here, containing 306 tokens, a figure which incidentally might have been inflated somewhat by the highly repetitive usage of some central expressions, such as *beat*, *defend*, *hit* and *shoot*. Consisting mainly of transitive verbs in the active form (i.e. showing the “acts of war” on the pitch), these words typically signal different types of intensified activity, often in terms of power, speed, impact, precision, etc. The following table provides some illustration:

Attack	collapse	Kill	Rush
Beat	Crash	Knock	Shoot
Belt	Defend	Lash	Slap
Blaze	explode	Miss	Smash
blow away	Fall	Nail	Struggle
Cannon	Fire	Pound	Threat
Catapult	Grapple	Ram	Tumble
chop down	Hit	Retreat	Upend

Table 4. Examples of war-inspired action words (verbs) in the present MBM material.

In contrast to the agent nouns above, classed as straightforward instances of metaphors, the action verbs seem to have a wider set of functions, ranging from clearcut instances of metaphor, as in *blaze*, *catapult*, *explode* and *smash*, to more vague cases intensifying the often rapid and violent action of the game, as in *fall*, *grapple*, *rush* and *tumble*. The latter type of verbs can not be seen as metaphors proper, arguably, since they tend to reflect what is literally happening on the pitch, although in a rather dramatic or exaggerated way. What these verbs are concerned with, then, is not so much metaphorical mapping from the domain of warfare, but rather of adding to the showcase part of the commentary by pacing competitive parts of the play through various fight-related words. This is tantamount to saying, then, that many of them mirror concepts that relate to the outskirts of the war domain.

In the category of activity/state/result words, there were also a large number of war-inspired terms, 255 to be precise, all of them nouns. As already hinted at, this was a rather heterogeneous collection of items, encompassing descriptions of everything from events, conditions and relationships to instruments, injuries and various aspects of the play (i.e. the “war campaigns” and their consequences on the pitch). As in the case of the action words, there was a great deal of repetition of some central expressions, such as *attack*, *hit*, *penalty* and *shot*, the collective force of which may partly explain the high number of instances here as well. In the table below, a set of typical examples are given:

Battle	disaster	Peace
camaraderie	escape	penalty
counter-attack	failure	rampage
Crash	fight	Shot
Danger	injury	Stab
Death	mercy killing	submission
Demise	miss	supremacy

Table 5. Examples of war-inspired activity/state/result words (nouns) in the present MBM material.

Notwithstanding its heterogeneity, this category shows a similar range of expressions to that of the action verbs. This is to say that the excerpted material contained cases of both straightforward war metaphors, such as *battle*, *counter-attack*, *mercy killing* and *peace*, and more vague literal descriptions of activities and their consequences on the pitch, still with some relevance to the war domain, such as in *danger*, *escape*, *failure* and *injury*, thereby providing an amplifying effect on the suspense of the football drama. Again, then, support is adduced for the idea that commentators make use of mappings from a rather extensive domain of war-like concepts when trying to infuse life in their online match reports.

On the descriptive side of the data, finally, we find a set of adjectival words, 65 altogether, which tend to bring out the often violent and militaristic character of the game (i.e. its “bellicose backdrop”). Being considerably less frequent than those reflecting the core action and activities of the play, these items include war-related expressions such as the following:

Brave	defensive	oppressed
Brutal	desperate	strategic
Cruel	ferocious	tactical
Dangerous	frantic	unguarded
Dead	juntaesque	unpunished

Table 6. Examples of war-inspired attributive words (adjectives) in the present MBM material.

Notably, the violent force of many of these words comes to the fore in examples such as *brutal*, *cruel*, *desperate*, *ferocious* and *frantic*. While such words muster a fighting-spirit concept which makes them pose as metaphorical mappings from the war domain, they also seem to reflect, at least to some extent, a literal description of the actions in the game or the psychological state of some of its players, for example as seen in the (brutal, cruel, ferocious) character of a late tackle and the (desperate, frantic) state of its injured victim, respectively. Here, however, exaggeration seems to be an important ingredient of the descriptions applied, arguing again for amplifying terminology being used in order to increase the nerve of the match report.

In short, then, it has been demonstrated that the present data contain a broad spectrum of expressions relating to the war domain in a wide sense. At one end of the scale, we have pure metaphorical mappings from classical war concepts, such as *captain* (agent noun), *attack* (action verb), *shot* (activity noun) and *defensive* (descriptive adjective); at the other end, we have more vague or general expressions relating to the extension of the same domain, be it words of fighting, violence or competition, such as *winner* (agent noun), *knock* (action verb), *failure* (activity noun) and *dangerous* (descriptive adjective). Thus, to answer the second of the research questions posed earlier, the terminology used in MBM football commentary has been shown to cover most of the major aspects of the source domain, both in terms of cognitive concepts and word categories/functions.

Turning now to the third research question in this context, how the noted cases of cognitive mapping from the war domain can be accounted for, we have already seen, through the quotes given earlier, that scholars tend to argue for a strong connection between the domains of war and football. And this is an impression which gains momentum by other relevant facts in this context, for example that basically the same type of mapping seems to take place in other types of football reporting (e.g. Crolley et al. 1998, Chapanga 2004, Seddon 2004:25ff.), and that football games in some cases have come to ignite even real conflicts in the world, e.g. the “football war” between El Salvador and Honduras in 1969, and

the hooligan events at the Heysel stadium in Brussels in 1985, showing that the game also has a role as a political instrument (cf. Orwell 1945, Chapanga 2004). To illustrate this conceptual connection, let us take a closer look at the essence of this similarity, as shown in Table 7.

source domain = war	target domain = football
<i>key concepts:</i>	<i>key concepts:</i>
politics, conflict, battlefield;	sports, competition, arena;
army, soldier;	team, player;
aggression, ability;	challenge, skill;
weapon, ammunition;	body part, ball;
hit, kill, defeat;	trick, score, beat;
win/loss, supremacy.	win/loss, title.

Table 7. Inventory of parallel key concepts in the source domain of war and the target domain of football

The implication of this table is as follows. Just as war has to do with political conflict that takes place in a battlefield, football is concerned with sports competition that occurs in an arena. The participants in war consist of armies of soldiers mustering both aggression and ability to handle their weapons and ammunition, just as footballers are organised in teams of players who challenge their opponents on the basis of skilful treatment of the ball using various parts of their body. For soldiers the aim is to hit, kill and defeat the enemy in order to win the war and achieve political supremacy, just as the objective of football players is to trick the opponents, score goals and beat them, thereby winning the game and the title of the competition. Such a description, in other words, epitomizes the impression maintained by some anthropologists in the field, namely that “football is ritualised war: a stylised territorial battle, complete with casualties, which can only be resolved with the victory and defeat that produces winners and losers” (Seddon 2004:26).

The above conceptual parallelism shows clearly that there is good ground for claiming that the master metaphor FOOTBALL IS WAR has high validity in the present context. However, as already implied, that is not likely to be the full story. As shown by the analysis of the MBM commentary material, there is more to the conceptual connection between war and football than just metaphorical expression, as indicated by the fact that football commentary often contains a wider selection of vocabulary which is only marginally relevant to the war domain as such, but which has an important role to play in adding pace and a violent touch to the drama of the game. As we have seen, such ground-sharing expressions relate primarily to the action and activities on the field, which is rather natural since they tend to reflect the very core of the play in terms of what the teams, players, coaches and referees are up to. This type of vocabulary argues for commentators making use of a widely defined war domain when trying to depict a game of football, setting the stage for the creation of an often full-fledged war scenario through which they can provide zest to the match covered. After all, one of the main tasks of online commentators and pundits, whether their coverage is oral or written, is to set up and market a media product which arouses interest and drama among football fans, without adding unnecessary complexity or difficulty of understanding. Such an objective can be reached conveniently, it may be assumed, by invoking the simplicity and straightforwardness of warfare, i.e. basically physical conflict, which apparently translates rather well into football action. With metaphor defined as a means of facilitating understanding by conceiving of one thing in terms of another (cf. Lakoff & Johnson’s 1080:36), it follows that commentators tend to employ this cognitive principle in

their booths, whether they are aware of it or not, in order to make the game easy to comprehend, while trying at the same time to increase its attractiveness by supplementing instances of metaphor with various forms of intensifying terminology that add action and suspense as well as pace and power to the commentary. Interestingly enough, this frequent overlapping of domains seems to have led to a situation where the concepts of war and football have become partly indistinguishable in the minds of today's commentators (and fans), yielding support for the idea that war-inspired vocabulary has in fact become an unavoidable feature in current football reporting as well as an indispensable tool for those journalists who are set to provide it.

Conclusion

All in all, then, given the data and arguments put forward above, we are now in a position to sum up the main findings of the present investigation as follows. Accordingly, despite the small scale of the study, it can be said to:

- confirm the successful application of cognitive metaphor theory to football language in general, and MBM reporting in particular;
- identify a similar structure for the conceptual domains of war and football, making it possible for the terminology to mix without clashing;
- illustrate the common usage of war-inspired metaphors in this context, making a case for the master metaphor FOOTBALL IS WAR;
- highlight the frequent application of vocabulary only marginally relevant to the war domain, which has the function of adding nerve, pace and a violent touch to the game;
- support the idea that the action on the pitch is conceptualized in terms of something which we understand more readily, namely physical conflict;
- describe MBM football reporting as an effective way for journalists to transform the game into a war scenario, thereby addressing the consumer on a more basic and emotional level
- show how the combination of conceptual mapping and intensifying terminology can be used to increase the value of such reporting as a live media product.

In short, to travesty the famous title by Lakoff & Johnson (1980), using war-inspired terminology is a strategy that football commentators live by.

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