THE LANGUAGE OF ONLINE SPORTS COMMENTARY IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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This paper attempts to describe a relatively new media genre (or as the author prefers to see it, an electronic register), i.e., online sports commentary (OSC). The analysis concerns English-language online live soccer match reports, and is based on a methodological framework proposed by D. BIBER and S. CONRAD (2009), who in register studies emphasize the correlation between the situational characteristics and lexico-grammatical features of a particular language variety. The paper also aims to compare the register in question with other related varieties, i.e., written sports commentary (WSC) and sports announcer talk (SAT) in order to corroborate the hypothesis that the register of online commentary is a hybrid of spoken and written language.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the language of the Internet has drawn a considerable amount of interest among linguists, some of whom have tried to label this variety of language. For example, Davis and Brewer call it *electronic discourse* and define it as 'writing that very often reads as if it were being spoken – that is, as if the sender were writing talking' (after CRYSTAL 2001: 25). In his monograph on Internet language, CRYSTAL (2001) uses the concept of *Netspeak* – a cover term for four communicative situations, i.e., e-mail, chatgroups, virtual worlds and the Web. In Crystal's view, Netspeak incorporates elements of both speech and writing, with the predominance of the latter. Finally, BIBER & CONRAD (2009) look at online language in a broader perspective, treating it as part of electronic communication. They elaborate on the situational and linguistic features of e-mails, text messages and e-forum postings, treating them as examples of *electronic registers*.

The present article aims to investigate the language of online sports commentary (OSC), which in online contexts is usually referred to as minute-by-minute or play-by-play reporting. A typical report is designed to provide detailed coverage of a sporting event, and consists of a series of contributions offered in real time on a minute-by-minute basis, usually by professional sportswriters. This is a relatively new variety of online language, which has not

received due attention in sociolinguistic research. Notable exceptions include two studies by CHOVANEC (2006, 2008), which do not, however, investigate online reports from a register perspective, but focus on their functions – a point that will be addressed later on in this paper. Given the rising popularity of online reporting, which is not restricted solely to sporting events[1], it seems worthwhile to provide at least a cursory analysis of this language variety. Though our analysis will be restricted to soccer commentary, it seems safe to assume that many, if not most, of its findings will apply to the online reporting of other sporting events.

In our discussion of the language of online sports commentary, we will attempt to answer two research questions. Firstly, is it legitimate to consider this variety to be a hybrid of two related varieties: sports announcer talk (TV live commentary) and written sports commentary (reports which are produced some time after the end of a sporting event and published online or in the press)? In other words, to what extent does OSC incorporate the features of the two registers? The other research question is: does the variety in question (which I also consider an example of an online register) exhibit any distinctive features that are not found in TV or written sports commentary?

2. REGISTER PERSPECTIVE

Limitations of space do not permit a thorough exploration of the concept of register, which will be central to our analysis. The most comprehensive insights into the theory of register were offered by BIBER & CONRAD (2009). As they define it, 'a register is a variety associated with a particular situation of use (including particular communicative purposes)' (BIBER & CONRAD 2009: 6).[2] Typical examples of registers include written and spoken occupational varieties and languages for special purposes. Of greater salience is, however, the framework for register investigation proposed by the two authors. At the heart of this approach lies the conviction that the linguistic features are functionally motivated. A register analysis consists of the following three stages: '(1) describing the situational characteristics of the register; (2) analyzing the typical linguistic characteristics of the register; and (3) identifying the functional forces that help to explain why those linguistic features tend to be associated with those situational characteristics' (BIBER & CONRAD 2009: 47).

3. SPORTS ANNOUNCER TALK AND WRITTEN SPORTS COMMENTARY

In their approach, BIBER & CONRAD (2009) emphasize the need for a comparative perspective. In other words, if a register analysis is to yield satisfactory findings, it is worthwhile to compare an investigated variety with other registers. Thus we will briefly describe two related varieties whose some of the linguistic features OSC is presumed to incorporate:

[1]   For example, the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 was covered by a number of online news services, both international (e.g., BBC Online, Yahoo! News, guardian.co.uk) and domestic (e.g., gazeta.pl).
[2]   There are of course a host of other definitions available. For example, register has also been defined as 'a communication situation that occurs regularly in society (in terms of participants, communicative functions, setting and so forth)' characterized by 'identifying markers of language structure and language use, different from the language of other communication situations' (FERGUSON 1994: 20). For other definitions and a comparative analysis of sociolectal and registerial variation see LEWANDOWSKI 2010.

sports announcer talk (SAT) and written sports commentary (WSC). Both can be regarded as subvarieties of soccer language (Lewandowski 2008), displaying some similarities and differences.

SAT is a concept proposed by Ch. Ferguson (1983) in his seminal study of live baseball commentary. Though originally applied to radio commentary, it was readily embraced by other researchers to refer also to TV reporting (cf. Reaser 2003).[3] It can be defined as 'the oral reporting of an ongoing activity, combined with provision of background information and interpretation' (Ferguson 1983: 155–156).[4] Ferguson and other SAT analysts distinguish between two phases of discourse: play-by-play and color commentary. 'Play-by-play description focuses on the action, as opposed to colour commentary which refers to the more discursive and leisurely speech with which commentators fill in the quite long spaces between spurts of action' (Holmes 2001: 247). TV soccer commentary increasingly involves two sportscasters: a professional commentator, whose job is to provide a detailed account of the action on the field, and an expert summarizer (a pundit, who is often a coach or a former player), who, thanks to his[5] expertise, recapitulates some of the game events and reflects on them. Finally, SAT is characterized by the frequent occurrence of football-specific terminology (including slang terms) as well as by some distinctive lexico-grammatical features, such as: the predominance of the Present Simple Tense in reporting game events (especially by the main commentator), a wide range of inverted and passive structures, the use of ellipsis (subject and copula *be* deletion), signposting devices (adverbs of time and place), demonstrative pronouns (*this*, *that*), and various suprasegmental features (Beard 1998). As is the case with many varieties of spoken language, the SAT discourse is lacking in coherence, and is marked with a high proportion of unfinished utterances, self-repairs as well as interruptions. Its syntax should be analyzed in terms of clauses, rather than sentences (though delineating clause boundaries is a daunting task for analysts of spoken language).

WSC has, sadly, received far less attention in sociolinguistic research. Ghadessy (1988) treats it as both a register and a discourse genre, distinguishing three major characteristics of this variety. Firstly, just like SAT, WSC is composed of two discourse phases: 'the objective report and the expression of personal view/opinion' (Ghadessy 1988: 20); in other words, 'uninvolved' and 'involved' language. Secondly, WSC is a written monologue addressed to a large number of readers, who can hardly provide any feedback to its author(s). Lastly, since there are a number of shared values between the writer(s) and the target reader group, WSC abounds in specialist terms. This variety also relies on relatively formal language with more elaborated syntactic patterns (e.g., time clauses), a higher proportion of nouns (at the expense of personal pronouns), and a wider range of vocabulary than in oral commentary. Since the primary purpose of WSC is to give an account of a sporting event with the benefit of hindsight, it is no wonder that the discourse is predominantly composed of past tense verb forms.

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[3]   Henceforth, both SAT and WSC will be used to refer to the language of soccer reporting.

[4]   It is believed that good TV sportscasters should not speak too much; they should help viewers interpret sports events rather than talk about them in detail (Ostrowski 2003: 58).

[5]   Since, to my knowledge, the overwhelming majority of soccer commentators and journalists are male, I will be using the pronouns *he/him* and the possessive adjective *his* to refer to these occupations.

4. THE SITUATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF OSC

In our analysis of the situational factors that have an impact on the language of minute-by-minute reports we will refer to the set of seven register determinants postulated by Biber & Conrad (2009: 40–47).

A. **Participants** – OSC is produced by a sportswriter, who is sitting in front of a TV screen, and following a game. However, the text is usually co-constructed by other addressors, i.e., fellow sportswriters (who may be watching a soccer game at its actual venue). Their role is to provide color commentary, by offering statistics, their own feedback and all other background information. This kind of involvement usually occurs if there is hardly any interesting ongoing action on the field. Below is an example of this type of commentary provided by an ESPN journalist watching the 2010 World Cup final from the stands of Soccer City Stadium in Johannesburg.

(1)   *85' John Brewin, at Soccer City: It looks as if extra time beckons. Robben has again blown a golden chance. The Dutch bench claim foul play but they have a nerve.* (ESPN)[6]

In terms of addressees, OSC is intended for a group of individuals (i.e., football fans), who, for some reasons, have no access to TV/radio broadcast of a soccer game they want to follow, but do have online access, and want to be updated live on how the game is unfolding.[7]

B. **Relations among participants** – like practically all electronic registers, OSC displays some degree of interactiveness, which, is however, somewhat limited. Its addressees usually have an opportunity to give their feedback by posting messages on an electronic forum (some of these postings can be incorporated into the OSC discourse). Both sets of participants do not have any personal relationship (however, as will be demonstrated, the authors of online reports try to build rapport with their readers in various ways), but do have a substantial amount of shared knowledge.

C. **Channel** – minute-by-minute contributions are, naturally, produced in the written mode and immediately sent electronically to be displayed on the website.

D. **Production circumstances** – since online reports are composed of comments that have to be typed out practically every minute, they are in fact produced in real time. This means that their authors need to work under huge time pressure and thus have very little time for revising, editing, deleting and adding language. Even though they do have some opportunities for changing content (relative to their linguistic competence and typing speed), it needs to be emphasized that these opportunities are far more restricted than in the case of most written registers, including WSC.

E. **Setting** – the addressors and addressees do not share the place of communication. The time is usually shared; however, it has to be noted that online reports can be read long after the end of the reported sporting event (most of them are stored in the archives of online services).

F. **Communicative purposes** – in terms of general purposes, OSC is primarily designed to inform its readers about the ongoing action on the field, by providing minute-by-minute updates. Yet play-by-play reports also perform secondary functions: their authors by means

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[6]   A complete list of all example sources and their abbreviations can be found after the References.

[7]   However, judging by the content of some e-forum contributions, there are people who simultaneously follow a TV broadcast and an online report.

of a wide range of linguistic devices try to get their readers involved in the game events. They cast themselves as TV or radio commentators, trying to generate an aura of excitement. Additionally, online written commentary can perform an entertaining function, especially if the need for the expression of personal attitudes comes to the fore.[8]

G. **Topic** – the general domain is, of course, football. More specifically, OSC focuses on the course of a particular game. In the preview, it typically provides some background information, thereby setting the scene for the upcoming event. In the final section, online reports can discuss the implications that a soccer match may have for the teams' future.

5. METHODOLOGY

This paper is a small-scale study of English OSC. A more detailed analysis involving a Polish-English contrastive perspective will be published in an separate monograph on soccer language.

For the purposes of the study I compiled a corpus of 8 online reports from two sources (4 reports from each): espn.com and eurosport.yahoo.com, which are the official websites of the ESPN and Eurosport TV channels, respectively. It contained the reports of four World Cup 2010 games: Brazil vs. The Netherlands, Uruguay vs. Ghana, Germany vs. Spain and Spain vs. The Netherlands. The whole corpus originally totaled 23,598 words, but was later reduced to 21,274 words. In order to conduct a salient quantitative analysis, I had decided to exclude the preview sections as they contained contributions produced some time before the kick-off, and at irregular intervals (not minute by minute). Not having to work under time pressure, the OSC authors had a relatively comfortable amount of time to make pre-match comments, and were able to revise them prior to posting them on the website. Thus due to different linguistic features, the match previews had to be excluded from the quantitative analysis, as they would have distorted its findings.

Some of the linguistic features of the online reports were quantitatively compared with samples of SAT and WSC. The SAT corpus consisted of 40 minutes of British TV live commentary of the same World Cup games (10 minutes from each game[9]), and totaled 5,580 words. The WSC corpus data came from three football news websites: fifa.com, uefa.com and goal.com. This corpus contained 12 match reports (there were three reports of each of the four games in question) with a total of 12,324 words.

As those text corpora varied in size, in order to compute the frequency of occurrence of particular linguistic features, it was necessary to calculate their 'normed' rates of occurrence, i.e. the number of occurrences of a particular feature per 1,000 words (BIBER & CONRAD 2009: 62).[10] To perform such conversions, the following formula was applied:

Normed rate = (raw count / total word count) × 1000 words

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[8]   Chovanec goes even further to argue that minute-by-minute online reports combine informative and entertaining functions: 'MBMs constitute a form of infotainment that, at times, almost borders on a comedy show staged by the commentator for the amusement of his audience' (CHOVANEC 2008: 267). This is definitely true of **some** play-by-play reports (examples include the *guardian.co.uk* match reports and the Polish *zczuba.pl* – an alternative sports news service).

[9]   I made sure that the samples are representative of TV soccer commentary by selecting various parts of the broadcast (not only the highlights with a lot of action and controversy, but also periods of dull and slow play).

[10]   I have decided to slightly revise the formula proposed by Biber & Conrad, who suggest multiplying quotients by 100.

6. ANALYSIS OF OSC LINGUISTIC FEATURES

We will begin with a quantitative and qualitative analysis of selected OSC features. Table 1 lists the normed rates for some lexico-grammatical features which occur in three registers of soccer language: TV live commentary (SAT), online sports commentary (OSC) and written sports commentary (WSC).

T a b l e 1. Normed rates of occurrence (per 1,000 words) for selected linguistic features in SAT, OSC, and WSC

Linguistic feature	SAT	OSC	WSC
Present Simple Tense	55.3	63.3	1.7
Present Continuous Tense	9.1	7.9	0.2
Present Perfect Tense	15.6	5.5	0.2
Past Simple Tense	22	4.7	70.5
Past Continuous Tense	1.1	0.6	1.3
Past Perfect Tense	1.1	0.0	1.3
Copula *be* deletion	10.2	7.9	0.0
Subject simplification	7.0	2.8	0.0
Subject-verb inversion	3.7	1.6	0.0
Nouns	220.0	281.4	299.5
Adverbs of time (*now*, *still*)	8.6	4.2	2.0
Adverbs of place (*here*, *there*)	6.4	3.8	1.5
Personal pronouns (*he*, *him*)	24.7	13.9	7.6
This identifying a player	4.3	0.0	0.0
It denoting the ball	1.6	1.3	0.2

Source: own compilation

In terms of tense usage, OSC displays greater similarity to SAT than to WSC. As the table well illustrates, it is present tenses that predominate in this register. The Present Simple Tense is used even more frequently in online reports than in TV commentary. A typical OSC contribution is composed solely of Present Simple forms:

(2)   *92' Ghana **clear** and **look** to break. Appiah **finds** Boateng, his cross **is** too long and Uruguay **have** the ball.* (ESPN)

The distribution of verb tenses evidently has to do with the production circumstances and communicative purposes of the register under investigation. Since the addressors work under huge time pressure by having to provide contributions every minute, they can primarily focus on the ongoing action on the pitch. They also want to involve their readers, creating an impression that what they are reporting on is happening at the moment of speaking. We know that given the time lapse of at least several seconds as well as typing speed restrictions, this impression is false. The Present Simple Tense is even more pervasive in OSC than in SAT since TV commentators do not always need to use too many verbs to describe events on the field. This is mainly because TV images tell a substantial part of the story.

(3)   *Capdevilla … **Finds** Iniesta ... Xavi ... Iniesta. Always extra pass available.* (BBC: Ger – Spa)

The two registers also exhibit similarity with respect to the rates of occurrence for the Present Continuous Tense, which in sports commentary is typically used to report background events. However, SAT and OSC have been found to display some differences in tense distribution. For example, the Present Perfect Tense is far more common in SAT than in online reports. This may be due to the fact that OSC authors focus primarily on play-by-play reporting, presenting events in a linear sequence as they happen one after another (see example 2). There is also little opportunity to provide frequent recaps of the most exciting and controversial events of the game, which seems to account for a very low rate of occurrence for past tense forms in online reporting. The Past Simple Tense is used five times more frequently in SAT than in OSC, and constitutes a pervasive feature of WSC. Interestingly, the Past Continuous and Past Perfect occur very infrequently in all the three varieties.

In their discussions of radio and TV commentary, Ferguson (1983) and Reaser (2003) elaborate on two distinctive characteristics of this register, namely copula *be* deletion and subject simplification. 'Prosiopesis in SAT serves to "index the moment" as non-leisurely (you have to speak rapidly and concisely), informal (you mustn't sound too bookish), exciting (like the attention-getting language of headlines or advertising copy), and vignette-quality (like captions of pictures)' (Ferguson 1983: 159). Examples of this elliptical language can also be found in OSC though they are not as common as in SAT (especially subject simplification, which in TV commentary is two and a half times more frequent than in live online reports). Sometimes both features can co-occur in one utterance.

(4)   *14' Trochowski and Lahm do very well on the right and the winger is in but the cross too deep. Puyol makes a meal of it though, heading out for a corner under no pressure.*
        15' Taken by Ozil, who overhits it a bit and Casillas flaps. (EURO)

The broader context helps soccer fans (and perhaps lay readers as well) arrive at the intended meaning of the last utterance. In standard language it would read: ***The corner kick*** (or ***it***) ***is*** *taken by Ozil, who*… The occurrence of copula *be* deletion and subject simplification in OSC is a consequence of real time production circumstances, i.e.: the need to convey information in a quick and efficient manner.[11] These two register features are non-existent in written reports.

Likewise subject-verb inversion, which is another SAT feature discussed by Ferguson (1983). This device is used to give the sportscaster more time to identify the player who is on the ball. Yet it also seems to serve emphatic purposes and 'convey an element of suspense and surprise' (Biber et al. 1999). In OSC subject-verb inversion is designed to focus the readers' attention on the field action. However, this feature is not as frequent as in SAT. Below is an example:

(5)   *60' **Here comes Torres**! Villa comes off! I'd have left him on, wouldn't you?* (ESPN)

So far we have seen that the OSC register exhibits some quantitative correspondences with SAT. However, online reports are in some ways also similar to WSC. For example, nouns in OSC are used almost as frequently as in written match reports. Nonetheless, it

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[11] Real time production circumstances also lead to occasional word omissions as well as spelling and grammar mistakes, such as (my corrections in square brackets): *a very tight game between **to*** [two] *excellent sides of contrasting styles* (EURO), *it will* [be] *interesting to see…* (ESPN), or *Gyan **show*** [shows or showed] *great strength to hold off Scotti* (ESPN).

has to be admitted that the rate of occurrence for this linguistic feature in SAT is not much lower[12] than in the other two registers.

In our analysis we will now look at the selected deictic expressions, whose use in online reports is primarily designed to create an impression of a shared time and place. As Table 1 shows, time and place adverbials are by far more common in TV commentary than in WSC. As regards the OSC register, it is located midway between the other two varieties in terms of the frequency of place adverbials and personal pronouns. This variety relies more heavily on the time adverbials *now* and *still* than WSC (though these two adverbs are far more common in SAT than in online reports). Below are examples of OSC utterances that contain place and time adverbials:

(6)   *6' Decent start by Uruguay, but Ghana have a free-kick **here**.* (EURO)

(7)   *Alves trips De Jong, Netherlands will look to keep possession **now**.* (ESPN)

(8)   *30' So, half an hour played and **still** goalless… it's a tactical battle alright…* (EURO)

The rates of occurrence for the personal pronouns *he* and *him* in SAT, OSC and WSC confirm the findings that pronouns are more pervasive in spoken language than in written registers, the reason being that speech focuses to a greater extent on individuals and their actions. In the case of the three registers under investigation, the data is indicative of the 'intermediate' status of online reports.

We are left with two more characteristics that need to be discussed quantitatively. Sportscasters frequently use the demonstrative pronoun *this* to identify the player who is on the ball at the time of speaking. This linguistic feature, which is a pervasive attention-drawing device in SAT, is completely absent in the OSC corpus data (nor, for obvious reasons, does it occur in written reports). Interestingly, however, online commentary has incorporated yet another SAT feature, namely the use of the pronoun *it* to refer to the ball. As Table 1 shows, it is almost as common as in TV commentary.

(9)   *Pedro gives **it** away and Lahm gets **it** wide right. Good cross, half cleared, now Ozil.* (EURO)

OSC exhibits a number of other interesting features that were not subjected to the quantitative analysis, but are worth investigating. If we apply a genre perspective, we will see that OSC tries to emulate TV or radio live commentary in a few ways. For example, by including such rapport-building devices as salutations and closings, online report writers want to make the discourse more interactive by establishing a more personal relationship with their readers.

(10)   *18:30 **Good evening and welcome to tonight's match** between Uruguay and Ghana in the quarterfinals.* (EURO)

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[12] These findings are partially in line with other quantitative analyses of spoken and written registers. According to BIBER et al. (1999: 65), 'nouns are most common in news […] they are by far least common in conversation'. The reason why nouns in SAT seem to be more common than in other spoken registers could be attributed to the fact that in TV commentary they are often used to identify particular players (see example 3). This hypothesis would yet have to be confirmed in a more comprehensive large-scale study. However, the frequency rates for nouns in the three investigated registers are in line with Biber et al's finding that nouns constitute roughly 25% of the total lexicon.

(11)   ***And that will do it for tonight. Thanks for your company. It has been a pleasure bringing you coverage of the World Cup from the last month and we hope you've enjoyed it***. For me, the best team have won the trophy. Stay tuned for all the post-match reaction and ***we'll meet you back here in July 2014 for the World Cup in Brazil! Bye for now***. (ESPN)

Attempts at establishing a personal relationship are also made by means of occasional questions to the readers and references to shared knowledge.

(12)   45' Lodeiro on for Fernandez.
                  46' ***Can Lodeiro provide the spark Uruguay need to get back in this game?*** (ESPN)

(13)   48' Puyol rises to meet the corner, ***semi-final-style!*** But he doesn't get great contact on the ball… (EURO)

The question in example 12 sounds as if it were inviting comments from the readers (just like the question tag in example 5). In fact, many websites offer their readers feedback opportunities, and publicize their e-mails or e-forum and Twitter postings. The first sentence in example 13, which comes from the World Cup final online report, through the inclusion of the phrase *semi-final style* presupposes that the readers saw Spain's semi-final tie with Germany in which the player referred to, Carles Puyol, scored the winning goal with a header.

The OSC corpus features a wide range of devices that are aimed at 'creating an impression of orality', as Chovanec (2008: 265) puts it. For example, the reports contain informal vocabulary (example 14), including slang terms from football language (15), such as *ref* ('referee'), *lino* ('assistant referee'), or *sub* ('substitute'). Sometimes contributions do not contain clauses but various kinds of verbless phrases (14, 17, 18). OSC writers also try to render the prosodic features of speech, resorting to various paralinguistic devices typically applied in electronic discourse. To draw the readers' attention to the key or controversial moments of the game (e.g., goals scored, penalties awarded, serious offences committed, etc.), the authors of online reports use repeated letters (*gooooal*), interjections (16) or add exclamation points (16, 17). Most commonly, however, in order to express emotion, they use capital letters, consciously flouting one of the most fundamental conventions of netiquette, which says that typing in all caps is synonymous with yelling (16, 17), and is generally prohibited. The authors of online reports also try to convey pauses in speech with a view to creating an air of suspense and imitating genuine, sometimes incoherent, spoken language (18). Applying a functional interpretation, we could say that these devices serve a communicative purpose – they are designed to get their readers involved in the game events.

What follows is a set of examples illustrating all of the above points:

(14)   93' *Abreu with a diving header behind. Desperate* ***stuff*** *from Uruguay*. (ESPN)

(15)   39' *Van Bommel clips Xavi and immediately apologises to the* ***ref***. (ESPN)

(16)   12' ***VILLA! Oooh****! The diminutive striker lashes a back post volley into the side netting!* (EURO)

(17)   56' ***JUST WIDE FROM ALONSO!*** *He rasped a left-foot drive past the flailing Neuer but a yard wide* (EURO)

(18)   114' *Netherlands win a free kick … six minutes left … down to ten men … surely not …* (EURO)

As a round-up of our discussion of the OSC register in a contrastive perspective, we will briefly look at the samples of SAT (19), WSC (20) and OSC (21) describing the same game event: Andres Iniesta's World Cup winning goal.

(19)   Main Commentator: *Elia ... blocked off ... not given as a foul though. Jesus Navas trying to get into full flight. The Spanish are outnumbered in the Netherlands half but they still kept the ball. Iniesta ... now Torres ... Iniesta is in the middle. Torres is trying to find him. It's broken for Fabregas. Now it's Iniesta! This is it! That's the goal! Spain have surely won the World Cup.*
         Expert Summarizer: *Well done, Cesc Fabregas. He picks this pass out.* (BBC: Hol – Spa).

(20)   *The solitary goal came with penalties looming as substitute Cesc Fabregas played in Iniesta and the little midfielder drove emphatically across Maarten Stekelenburg and into the far corner.* (FIFA)

(21)   *116' GOAL! GOAL! INIESTA PUTS SPAIN INTO THE LEAD AND ON THE VERGE OF WORLD CUP GLORY! Iniesta is played in by Fabregas and the Barcelona man finishes brilliantly!* (EURO)

It would be a daunting task to argue that such short extracts can be representative of the registers they come from. Yet they are, at least to some extent, illustrative of some of the syntactic differences between SAT, OSC and WSC. The SAT extract is composed of very short clauses or phrases that are rich in deictic expressions. The ellipsis marks designate pauses that replace connectives, which would probably be used if this message was to be incorporated into written discourse. There is also little variation in terms of verb usage (*be* forms are frequent, though occasionally they get deleted). The WSC passage is one long sentence with action verbs in the Past Simple Tense which tell only part of the story.[13] Finally, the online report extract consists of two independent sentences of medium length with verbs in the Present Simple Tense. In terms of the amount of detail, it is similar to the WSC sample.

7. CONCLUSION

Referring to the first research question, it could be argued that OSC shares some of its linguistic features with both SAT and WSC, and thus can be regarded as a hybrid of both of these registers. Quantitatively, it displays similarity to SAT in terms of the predominance of the Present Simple verb forms (this tense is even more pervasive in OSC) and copula *be* deletion. What the register of online reports also shares with TV commentary is a few genre conventions, whose general purpose is to establish a more personal relationship with OSC readers. This is accomplished by means of salutations and closings as well as the use of informal vocabulary and occasional questions. However, looking at the rates of occurrence for subject simplification, subject-verb inversion, some adverbs of time and place, and personal pronouns, we would locate the OSC register somewhere halfway between SAT and WSC. Finally, online commentary shares some of its characteristics with post-match press and online reports. This applies to the rates of occurrence for nouns and lack of the demonstrative *this* for identifying players on the pitch. Applying a qualitative perspective, we will also discover that despite various attempts at rendering orality in the OSC discourse, its syntactic patterns are more characteristic of WSC thanks to well-formed coordinate sen-

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[13] Due to size restrictions, post-match reports cannot provide a detailed account of the action on the pitch.

tences. Concluding this part of the discussion, OSC, just like Netspeak in general, 'is identical to neither speech nor writing, but selectively and adaptively displays properties of both' (CRYSTAL 2001: 47).

Regarding the second research question, the study found that the OSC register is marked by relatively low rates of occurrence for past tense verb forms compared to the other two registers. The investigated variety also displays some spelling and punctuation conventions which are characteristic of most electronic registers, and are non-existent in WSC. Adopting a genre approach, we will notice the presence of other voices in the OSC discourse, which can be co-constructed by other sportswriters and fans, giving their feedback or providing match statistics. Contributions sometimes provide links to game-related news stories as well as audio and video material. In this sense, they belong to 'an emergent news genre differing from both print and broadcast: a theme-based group of news objects held together graphically, overlapping with other such groups, and undergoing progressive updating' (LEWIS 2003: 97).

As was argued in the Introduction, this paper is only a small-scale study of the OSC register, which deserves to be analyzed more thoroughly both quantitatively and qualitatively. Sample features that could be investigated in further studies of online reports include the use of adverbs and adjectives, overall vocabulary range (the type/token ratio) or communicative functions of utterances.

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ESPN – soccernet.espn.go.com
EURO – uk.eurosport.yahoo.com
UEFA – uefa.com
FIFA – fifa.com
GOAL – goal.com
BBC: Bra – Hol – TV broadcast of the 2010 World Cup quarterfinal Brazil vs. Holland
ITV: Uru – Gha – TV broadcast of the 2010 World Cup quarterfinal Uruguay vs. Ghana
BBC: Ger – Spa – TV broadcast of the 2010 World Cup semifinal Germany vs. Spain
BBC: Hol – Spa – TV broadcast of the 2010 World Cup final Holland vs. Spain

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