

Language Barriers in Sports: the case of Italian Professional Football

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This chapter aims at illustrating the dynamics of language barriers in sports and specifically in football. Considering the high percentage of international mobility of football players, the research focuses on the effects of the multilingualism generated by this type of international migration. It also analyses language barriers by focusing on banners in the Italian stadia. These banners, which should be re-coded to be comprehensible, were mainly collected from the digital database of the *Striscia la Notizia* broadcast archives. Through a demo-linguistic overview, the research reveals that 482 foreign players, recorded in the *Serie A* and *Serie B* (season 2015-2016) on the basis of the team's official websites, come from more than 69 countries and speak at least 44 languages. The inevitable language barriers which arise are analysed, considering that teams need to efficiently manage multilingualism to overcome these barriers for the ultimate purpose of sports competition. The study therefore proposes two models as first steps in managing language interaction in football, respectively on the basis of *collective multilingualism* and *individual multilingualism*. It further highlights that language diversity in football should be considered as an asset and suggests that future research should be conducted on linguistic and cultural mediation in football in the attempt to resolve language barriers in this field of social practice.

Key words: multilingualism, football, immigration, language barriers, mediation

1. Introduction

Multilingualism is not only the preserve of academics and bookish linguists, but it is also currently gaining ground in the social practice of sports. For example, football is not traditionally associated with linguistic prowess, yet it is nowadays replete with players who are fluent and articulate in several languages (European Union 2010). While sport has a societal role in positively influencing other social areas, including health, education and community-building, the mobility of professional sports people, who bring their own language (s) to a new country, shapes a new kind of multilingualism within the sports arena. A case in point is that of the increasing mobility of professional football players who change clubs very often and are recruited by Italian teams in order to be more competitive within the national football league system. As Ringbom (2012:186) points out, “a football team can be seen as a special case of a multilingual working environment”. While multilingualism is nowadays considered a valuable asset across Europe, it certainly creates language barriers within professional football teams where communication is a make or break. For example, members of a football team may face the burden of learning a complicated tactical system or a training methodology as a daunting communicative challenge. Thus, while players experience an enriching contact with new languages and cultures following their international mobility, they may encounter serious trouble due to language and communication barriers (Lavric et al. 2008), which can arise within the complex linguistic ecosystems of football teams, featured by players and coaches with different languages and cultural backgrounds. Thus, learning the language of the host community is crucial to survive, and integrate socially and professionally (Barni 2008). It should, however, be underlined that players’ language difficulties are perceived differently from those faced by other people in different contexts. In this specific case, for example, “[...] a talented football player’s almost non-existent English will be passed over much more easily than that of an illegal refugee [...]” (Jaspers 2012: 136).

On the other hand, misunderstanding and language barriers in the football arena may also spring from the presence of banners in the stadia. As Hall (1997: 5) points out, “turning up at football matches with banners [...] can also be thought of as ‘like a language’ – insofar as it is a symbolic practice which gives meaning or expression to the idea of belonging to a national culture, or identification with one’s local community”. Banners are hoisted to be read by all fans and can functionally convey various messages, including inspirational, demotivational, celebration and advertising ones. The first are meant to encourage the team to beat their opponents; the second are used amongst cheer squads to annoy fans of the other team in an atmosphere of rivalry; the third refer to players’ milestone games as rewards for the efforts made, while the final type can advertise club events or sponsors. In their study on the banners unveiled in the stadia by *Fiorentina* fans¹, Guerra et al. (2010: 13) observed how “most of the banners require an interpretation going beyond the literal sense” as the language used by Ultras is quite complex². The recurring use of ambiguous language, metaphors and other rhetorical figures of association in which words replace or refer to others may easily be seen as a language barrier especially since a shared understanding of issues related to the life of fans is required. Both in the case of football banner messages and of communication within professional football teams, multilingualism can turn into a “Babel”, a curse, confusion and barrier, or into a “Pentecost”, a blessing, a gift and an opportunity (Vedovelli 2010).

This chapter aims at analysing the effects and dynamics of language barriers in this sport through a demo-linguistic overview on the two major professional Italian football leagues. It first introduces the theoretical and methodological framework to the research study in order to then focus on the key issue of the migration of foreign players. The demographic and geo-

¹ The football team of Florence city in Italy.

² These football fans are renowned for their ultra-fanatical support to the extent of using violence, hateful chants and banners.

graphic distribution of the two Italian professional football leagues is considered to raise the question of multilingualism in this context. To this end, two models regarding individual and collective multilingualism in the practice of football are proposed also by focusing on the roles of players, trainers and banners. Some research prospects to managing language barriers in this field are eventually provided with specific reference to linguistic and cultural mediation in football.

2. Methodological background

A demographic analysis was carried out before analysing the languages of foreign players to circumscribe the phenomenon of multilingualism within the practice of football using a quantitative methodology. Demo-statistical data were collected from the official websites of the *Serie A* and *Serie B* football teams referring to the 2015-2016 season. On the basis of the demographic analysis of foreign players previously conducted (Siebetchu 2012, 2013), five indicators were introduced to classify football players, namely *presence*, *incidence*, *origin*, *dominance*, *geographic heterogeneity/homogeneity*. The indicator of presence highlighted the number of foreign players in the different teams and leagues. Incidence provides information related to the density of foreign players in the different teams and leagues, while origin refers to the players' nationalities, which allows to disclose the degree of internationalization in the different teams and in the case in point in the two Italian professional leagues. Furthermore, the indicator of dominance records the foreign nationalities with the highest concentration in the teams and is calculated taking the indicators of presence and incidence into consideration. Finally, geographical heterogeneity and homogeneity in the various teams differs from that of origin as it also records players' dual and multiple citizenships.

In addition, rhetorical analysis was carried out on the main figures of speech used by football fans in banners hoisted in different stadia. The qualitative analysis was supported by Jakob-

son's (1960) model of the functions of language. Focus was specifically placed on three of the six communication functions included in the model, namely, *emotive* (sender), *poetic* (message), *conative* (receiver) (see Siebetchu 2016). For this purpose, a corpus composed of 4.000 banners gathered in different Italian stadia was used. Data collection was facilitated by referencing Militello's (2004) data and by accessing the digital database available in the broadcast archives of the Italian television programme *Striscia la Notizia*³.

3. Multilingualism and Language Barriers in Professional Football Leagues

It is widely known that “languages fulfill two functions that cannot easily be separated: a communicative function, i.e. the transmission of information in a broad sense, and a symbolic function, associated with cultural and political traits, for example with people's sense of national identity” (Gazzola 2006: 394). Multilingual subjects such as football players and coaches are prone to language barriers when integrated into the professional working environment in a foreign country with subsequent interactional relapses both on and off the field. Among the different ways of obviating this problem, the University for Foreigners of Siena has taken action in implementing a multi-sport linguistic project with the aim of integrating foreign players in the Italian context. The project is based on the assumption that communication has a strong influence on the results achieved by sport teams. This belief is in line with the claim made by Lavric and Steiner (2012:15):

to enable the team to win, communication should be a priority; sociolinguistics as well as language acquisition researches have everything to gain by studying these authentic dynamics, problems as they develop and strategies formulated to offset their impacts.

³ www.striscialanotizia.mediaset.it [October 2, 2015].

The urge to develop new projects and models in this sense springs from the exponential growth in multilingualism as a result of the increase in the international mobility of football players. While this phenomenon is not something new as it has traditionally been part of the game itself (Lanfranchi & Taylor 2015), new socio-economic factors come into play, thus bringing the issue of language barriers to the fore. As Elliott (2015: 22) notes:

The majority, if not all, of the world's elite professional leagues now host players (and other associated workers including owners, managers, coaches, medical and sports science staff) from a broad cross-section of places [...] in football, the increasing commercialisation of the game at the elite level, driven, in part, by the developing symbiosis that is observable between sponsors, advertisers and the media, has resulted in the exponential growth in salaries for elite players plying their trade in one of Europe's core leagues.

The crucial issue of multilingualism and language barriers in professional football leagues can be tackled through the two models proposed in Siebetcheu (2013), namely, the *Toscane Favelle versione Albero di Natale model* (TFAN) and the *Pen-tecoste in Campo* (PC) model⁴. The aim of the TFAN model is to bring the eleven foreign languages mostly spoken in specific leagues and teams to light. The choice of eleven languages is symbolic because it corresponds to the number of players every team is supposed to send onto the field for a football match. The model is inspired, on the one hand, by the so-called tactical module, *Albero di Natale*, i. e. the so-called *Christmas-tree* formation, known as 4-3-2-1 and on the other, by the first model of data collection on immigrant languages in Italy, known as *Toscane Favelle* (Bagna et al. 2004).

In detail, the TFAN model is based on data collection of

⁴ Beyond these two models, Siebetcheu (in press) proposed two more models. The third model (*Tiki Taka Linguistico*) is based on direct observation and deals with the analysis of the visibility and vitality of languages in real interaction according to three indicators: written, oral and non verbal data. The fourth model (*Zona Mista*) is based on auto-confrontation data which aims at shedding light on the relation between real activity and represented activity.

languages, which takes the nationalities present in specific leagues or teams into account. Thanks to this model, Spanish and French have been found to be respectively the languages with the largest number of speakers in *Serie A* and *Serie B* leagues (respectively 88 and 30 speakers). Therefore, Spanish and French can be seen as the idioms which are most rooted in the football language space of these two Italian professional football leagues, functioning in similar ways to *immigrant languages*. Bagna et al. (2003) distinguish these from *migrant languages* as they are well rooted in a particular context. In the specific case of football leagues the vitality and visibility of these languages is not threatened even in the case of the mobility of professional football players. A case in point is that of the team of *Catania* in *Serie A*, during the season 2012-2013, with 15 Spanish-speaking players, of which 13 from Argentina, ranking as the team where Spanish was most dominant. This context facilitated the task of the Argentine trainer, Diego Simeone, who coached Catania from January to June 2011, as he often spoke Spanish during trainings and matches.

While the TFAN model sheds light on the potential languages used in various leagues and teams, it does not, however, provide any idea of the degree of individual players' multilingualism as it reductively determines languages solely on the basis of the variable of nationality. As Barni (2008: 224) points out, "since a group's demolinguistic weight within an area is a necessary but not a sufficient requirement for the maintenance and vitality of their language, this model alone is not able to explain the complex dynamics of linguistic contact". Besides the variable of nationality, it is crucial to consider two other variables which affect foreign players' multilingualism: a player's individual experience, including childhood, family, school education and his professional experience in terms of football carrier.

These factors are addressed by the PC model which strives to identify and enhance all the languages of the player's repertoire, even including languages which are not used in the context of football, as well as those in which the player has partial

competence due to either the lack of recency of use or to limited proficiency. As an example, Clarence Seedorf held for a long time the record of being the player speaking the highest number of languages (six languages) in the *Serie A* league. In an interview released to *Menstyle* magazine⁵, the former player of Ajax (Netherlands), Sampdoria, Inter Milan, AC Milan (Italy), Real Madrid (Spain) and Botafogo (Brazil) declared he was able to speak the following languages:

- Surinamese, also called Sranantongo, which can be considered as his L1 (language of birth, language of origin);
- Dutch, which is the official language in Suriname, and thus seen as his language of education and citizenship;
- English, as another language of education, functioning also, as we know, as a *lingua franca* in many cases;
- Italian, acquired as one of the languages of his profession as Seedorf played for 14 years in Italy;
- Spanish, also acquired as a language of his profession as he played for 3 years in Spain;
- Portuguese, as an additional language of his profession as he played for the Brazilian team Botafogo from 2012 to 2014. Portuguese is also used at home, since Seedorf's wife is from Brazil.

In an interview released to the fashion magazine *Grazia*⁶, Seedorf further claimed that at home he used Italian, English, Spanish and Portuguese with his family, and that his children naturally code-switch between the four languages. This multilingual profile exemplifies how individual and professional experiences are important factors which need to be considered when analysing the issue of multilingualism and language barriers in the case of football players.

⁵ www.menstyle.it [April 7, 2008].

⁶ www.grazia.it [April 7, 2010].

4. Demo-linguistic Findings

The demo-linguistic analysis was conducted by applying the TFAN model and by sourcing the official websites of the teams and the *Transfermarkt* website⁷ which provides updated digital and interactive data of numerous football leagues. The data on languages were collected by sourcing the *Ethnologue* digital database, an online comprehensive catalogue of the world's known living languages⁸, as well as interview excerpts taken online newspapers. The analysis recorded 482 foreign players from 69 countries in the Italian *Serie A* and *Serie B* leagues with at least 44 languages spoken. Before analyzing the question of language barriers, demo-statistical findings referring to the season 2015-2016 are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Demo-statistical Findings on Foreign Football Players in Italy in *Serie A* and *Serie B* leagues (season 2015-2016).

Demo-statistical Indicators	<i>Serie A</i> League	<i>Serie B</i> League
1. <i>Presence</i> (n° foreign players)	320 Roma: 24	162 Spezia: 20
2. <i>Incidence</i>	57.5% Roma: 85.7%	25.7% Spezia: 68.9%
3. <i>Origin</i>	69 nationalities Brazil (<i>N</i> =46)	50 nationalities Brazil (<i>N</i> =18)
4. <i>Dominance</i>	Udinese: 6 from Brazil (26% of foreign players in the team; 20% of all the players of the team)	Spezia: 9 from Croatia (45% of foreign players in the team; 31% of all the players of the team)
5. <i>Geographical heterogeneity/homogeneity</i>	Roma: 25 nationalities Sassuolo: 6 nationalities	Pescara/Como: 10 nationalities Provercelli/Trapani: 2 nationalities

⁷ www.transfermarkt.it [October 2, 2015].

⁸ www.ethnologue.com [October 2, 2015].

Overall, findings show that out of the 320 foreign players in Serie A and 162 in Serie B, the *AS Roma* team had the highest number of foreign players ($N=24$) in the *Serie A* league, while *Spezia* had the highest number in the *Serie B* league ($N=20$). Based on the indicator of incidence, more than half of the total number of players was from foreign countries in *Serie A*, while numbers were almost halved in the *Serie B*. As for origin, most of the players of the two championships come from Latin America. Brazil is the nationality with the highest number of players in *Serie A* ($N=46$) and in *Serie B* ($N=18$). Moreover, the highest indicator of dominance was found in the *Serie A* team of Udinese with Brazilian players and in the *Serie B* team of Spezia with Croatian players. We can also recall the case of the *Serie A* team of Catania, during the season 2012-2013, which had 13 players from Argentina, resulting in 65% of all the foreign players and 50% considering all the players of the team. *Roma* was found to be the team in *Serie A* with the highest indicator of geographical heterogeneity counting 25 nationalities. An emblematic case of the geographical heterogeneity of players is that of the Franco-morocco-senegalese, Konko Abdoulay, belonging to the *Lazio* team. The player was born in France from a “Senegalese father and a Moroccan mother [and therefore possessing] three passports” (Afrique Foot 2010)⁹.

4.1. Players

Language barriers in football firstly depend on the language policies in football teams. And the language policies in football teams substantially depend on economic availability and motivations to promote (the task of the team) and to learn (the duty of players) languages. While in teams as important as *AS Roma*, *Udinese*, new foreign players attend Italian courses, in small teams like *Siena*, as revealed by the staff, “there are not specific

⁹ www.afriquefoot.fr [September 21, 2010].

language curricula to integrate foreign players”¹⁰. And since only few teams deal with the linguistic integration, according to the former coach of Austria, Heinz Peischl, “most of the teams do not care about the integration of foreign players. They consider the players as a commodity that must immediately operate and they do not realize that performance is closely related to the well-being [of the player]” (Lavric & Steiner 2012: 19). If small teams have some difficulties in managing multilingualism due to players’ linguistic diversity, big teams refer to interpreters who should be on the field together with the coaches during the training sessions. According to the Italian sports newspaper, *La Gazzetta dello Sport*¹¹, the former striker of *Barcelona*, *Inter Milan* and *Chelsea*, Samuel Eto’o declared shortly after his arrival in the Russian team *Anzi* that “all those who are not Russians have a personal interpreter in their language: when the coach has to explain an exercise, sometimes we can have six or seven interpreters in the field altogether”. On the other hand, autochthonous players can also encounter language problems under some circumstances, causing jealousy, resentment and accusations as in the case of the *Paris Saint Germain* team (France) reported: “the newspapers always hovers the discontent of players, who anonymously, denounce discrimination because Italian is the official language of the team and because if you are French you have less chance to play”¹². During the season 2012-2013, the team had, in fact, the Italian Carlo Ancelotti as trainer as well as nine players speaking Italian (5 Italians, including 3 naturalized, and 4 foreigners who spoke Italian having played in Italy).

¹⁰ This statement was made during the season 2012-2013 when the team was still playing in *Serie A*. Nevertheless, it is important to observe that in the past, new foreign players of Siena team attended specific Italian courses at the University of Foreigners of Siena.

¹¹ “*La Gazzetta dello Sport*”, 26 September 2011, p. 15.

¹² “*La Gazzetta dello Sport*”, 7 December 2012, p. 8.

4.2. Trainers

Players' multilingualism was also found to be a barrier for coaches as highlighted by Delio Rossi, former trainer of the Italian teams *Lazio*, *Palermo*, *Fiorentina*, *Sampdoria* and *Bologna*: "the problem is always the same, if you train seven people speaking seven different languages it is difficult. Now we live with interpreters"¹³. Nevertheless, interpreters are not a clear-cut solution to solving communication issues in the football context, where it is difficult to render emotions, states of mind and other psychological expressions during training sessions or matches, although they play a central role in the initial stages of the players' mobility. Trainers need to manage team communication on the field in the language of the country where they work also to gain the team fans' fondness. A particular case is that concerning Fabio Capello, former England team trainer whose initially self-assessment reported in Grosjean (2010: 98) is given in example (1):

- (1) At this moment my English is not so well [...] I am very proud and hon-or-ried.

On Sky Sports News, Capello used his English interlanguage despite his vow to learn English in a month¹⁴ as shown in example (2):

- (2) Is good that we play to win the ball, this I like.

During the friendly match against Hungary in 2010, Capello's words as a comment of victory and satisfaction to the English team was defined as "a disaster communication" (News of the World)¹⁵, as can be easily seen in example (3):

- (3) Well done, good win, good win.

¹³ www.mediagoi.it [November 04, 2010].

¹⁴ www.news.bbc.co.uk [December 18, 2007].

¹⁵ www.newsoftheworld.co.uk [04 November 2010].

Despite British journalists, players and the football federation complained against his use of an interpreter, rather than improving his English, years later after having already resigned from the job in England, Capello criticised British football player, Wayne Rooney who complained the Italian's lack of English was a problem for the England squad as shown in example (4):

- (4) Look, when I spoke they did understand me. But every now and then, when I tried to explain tactics, things didn't work out. You know what? Maybe it's because Rooney doesn't speak English. He doesn't understand English¹⁶.

On his side, Rooney underlined the benefits for the team as a result of Capello's resignation as suggested in example (5):

- (5) Now we do not lose anything because of translation. Compared to the World Cup in South Africa, we feel more relaxed, the whole staff is English and there is no word lost through translation. Now we understand all that our coach wants¹⁷.

Likewise, journalist Simon Barnes of *The Times* claimed that Capello was not totally committed to his role as indicated in example (6):

- (6) you could see that his heart was never in it. He never got the hang of English footballing culture; for that matter, he never even got the hang of the English language¹⁸.

The lack of the trainer's language proficiency in examples (1)-(2) shows how language barriers in example (3) turn into dissatisfaction on the players' side, causing resentment as a result of "a disaster communication". Barriers then lead to conflict between the parties: He doesn't understand English as in example (4); Now we understand all that our coach wants as in example

¹⁶ www.telegraph.co.uk [June 20, 2012]

¹⁷ www.corrieredellosport.it [June 26, 2012].

¹⁸ www.thetimes.co.uk [February 9, 2012].

(5). Eventually, language barriers drive cultural conflicts as in example (6): *He never got the hang of English footballing culture.*

4.3. *Banners in the Stadia as Language Barriers*

Although football banners add value to the competition beyond the simple game, enriching it with passion and emotion (Ferrerri 2008), their hidden meaning is targeted to few groups of fans as part of an identity process. This implies that banners are mostly meant to function as inspirational or demotivational messages (see section 1) within restricted circles which have their own football codes. In other words, banners can easily generate language barriers within the same language for those who are not part of such closed communities.

The semantic complexity embedded in these messages was analysed to disclose the intrinsic meaning of the most recurring figures of speech used. Findings show how metaphors and hyperboles are frequently employed within these texts to evoke strong feelings related to religious references as in example (7):

(7) Pazzini Santo Subito! [Pazzini Saint now!]

The former *Inter Milan* player, Pazzini is exalted for his good deeds in the team and endowed with religious qualities that plea for his status of becoming a Saint immediately. The hyperbole recalls authentic exceptional circumstances, for example, of the people's cries of *Santo Subito!* during the funeral of Pope John Paul II.

Other frequently used hyperboles refer also to the political status of football players, which is contextualised within local systems as in example (8):

(8) Vota e fai votare Cavani sindaco di Napoli
[Vote and encourage to vote Cavani as mayor of Naples]

In this sample, the text replicates the genre of election campaign propaganda in which the former *Napoli* player, Cavani deserves to surge to the status of mayor of Naples as his professional skills are equated to those of a good political leader.

Both these examples show how Ultras celebrate their football heroes, attributing them qualities and skills that go far beyond the sports environment. On the other hand, the use of euphemisms was often found to convey demotivational messages to opponent teams where lexical expressions substitute more direct words with a subtle tone of sarcasm as in example (9):

- (9) Caro Leo sognavi Wembley, hai conosciuto Wimbledon 7-3
[Dear Leonardo, you dreamt of Wembley, but you realized Wimbledon 7-3]

The context of the Champions Leagues semi-final in example (9) is replaced through the lexical item *Wimbledon*, where the sport of football is substituted by the tennis tournament and the score is given more as a tennis result than a football one. The banner is addressed to the *Inter Milan* coach Leonardo, familiarly called *Leo* and to his dream of victory. Sarcastically, the messages demotivates the coach, emphasising his failure as *Shalke 04* (Germany) defeated *Inter Milan* (7-3).

The figure of metonymy was also found to be frequently used in banners in to attribute metonymic value to single players as representatives of the whole team, to a team's shirt colours for club names, but also to collocate the position of fans in the stadium as in example 10:

- (10) Curva Nord Triplete, Curva sud Trepirla
[Curva Nord Treble, Curva sud Idiot]

The demotivational message addresses the *Curva Sud*, the southern stand where *AC Milan* fans are positioned. It attributes the stand the dialectal quality of *pirla* (idiot), reinforced by the prefix *tre* (three), which creates a homophone effect with the item *triplete* (treble), the victorious quality assigned to the *Curva*

Nord, the northern stand where *Inter Milan* fans follow matches at the *San Siro* stadium in Milan. The term *triple* (treble) acquires metonymic value as it is used in football to refer to a team winning three trophies (the top-tier domestic league, domestic cup and continental cup competitions) in a single season.

Metonymy was further expressed through the symbols of animals used to represent different teams, and particularly to their different states of being carnivores, herbivores, or omnivores in their eating strategies as shown in example (11):

- (11) 11 carnivori vs 11 erbivori. Se magna!!!
[11 carnivorous against 11 herbivorous. It's time to eat!!!]

The eleven players in each team are here classified respectively as *carnivori* (carnivorous) and *erbivori* (herbivorous) through the teams' animal symbols. The *Lazio* team players are symbolised by an eagle, a carnivorous bird of prey, while the *Juventus* team players by a zebra, known as a herbivorous animal. As the match is played, it is time to activate *eating strategies* so that the eagles will devour the zebras. This inspirational message uses the colloquial expression *Se magna* (It's time to eat) sourcing the Roman dialect to better encourage and support the *Lazio* players.

The analysed banners also made considerable use of word-play and irony, where meaning was meant to be interpreted at a surface level and/or at a more subtle level. In the latter case, the aim was to further strengthen the evocative and allusive power of messages as illustrated in example (12):

- (12) Per noi decidete leggi e restrizioni poi in aula pugni e spintoni si
alla tessera del parlamentare
[For us you decided laws and restrictions but in the parliament
you have a fist fight. Yes to the parliamentarian card]

The banner is laden with irony as a protest against the supporter card (*tessera del tifoso*), introduced by the former Italian minister of Home Affairs, Roberto Marroni, to help identify UI-

tras and cope with their acts of violence in the stadia. The card is seen as a restrictive measure taken by the Italian parliament, while ironically MPs engage in fist fights during institutional sessions.

Finally, many banners appear as poetic texts featured by rhyming schemes as in example (13):

- (13) Non di armadi, Né di letti, Sono pazza di, Marco Cassetti
[Neither of cupboard, nor of beds, I am crazy about Marco Cassetti]

The partial alternate rhyme between *letti* (beds) and *Cassetti* (former AS Roma player) transforms the banner text into a poem. In a similar vein, example (14) suggests an enclosed rhyme:

- (14) Se l'Inter non va a Mosca, Mosca va sull'Inter
[If *Inter Milan* doesn't go to Moscow, the fly will go to *Inter Milan*]

The banner text is essentially constructed as an ironic pun based on the Italian polysemic word *Mosca* (Moscow, fly). The first part of the text refers to the *Inter Milan* team's failure to qualify for the Champions Leagues final and thus it will not be able to go to Moscow where the game is held. In the second part, *Inter Milan* fans are teased through the use of the other meaning of the word *Mosca*: the fly will go to the team, an urban expression meaning *flies on shit*.

5. Managing language barriers: the linguistic and cultural mediator in sports

Considering the language barriers which players and trainers may face (see for example section 4.2.), it is important to help them resolve linguistic and cultural problems during the first months of their arrival in host countries. On the issue, Lavric and Steiner (2012: 24) propose the figure of *factorum* for new players stating that:

he is not there only to resolve football questions (matches, trainings) but he should help the newcomers to resolve administrative questions, finding a house, buying a car, choosing a doctor, a school for the children and many other things.

The Multisport project of the University for Foreigners of Siena is introducing a similar figure, namely, the linguistic and cultural mediator in sports. On the basis of the functions of the *factorum* outlined above, the professional figure of linguistic and cultural mediator proposed by the project should have the skills and knowledge in the following sectors of the practice of football: technical activities, football law, football tourism, football history, football didactics, sociology and anthropology of football both in the new country and in the foreign players' country of origin. The mediator should also have a good preparation (in at least two languages and relative cultures) in understanding and proposing solutions in front of linguistic, cultural and ethnopsychological effects related to the migration of players. While these mediators should not replace single extant professionals, who are not always specialized in football matters, they could be the first and temporary references for new players and trainers. Temporary references because it is important for players and trainers to become autonomous as soon as possible as the team cannot attend a full year to see the result of their integration on the field. Moreover, establishing confidence with a mediator is important for the players' psychological preparation and stability.

This study has shown that the increasing number of nationalities and languages in the professional Italian football leagues can easily generate language barriers, which hinder foreign players' carrier and impact on the competition of teams. Within the football arena, language barriers have been treated in this work not only as those determined by players' different languages, but also those springing within the same language used by fans in their football banners hoisted in the stadia. Furthermore, the study has highlighted how the *Toscane Favelle versione Albero di Natale* (TFAN) and the *Pentecoste in Campo* (PC) models are first steps in managing language interaction in

the multilingual space of football, where language diversity is assumed to be a valuable asset. In this direction, a more efficient management of multilingualism can be provided an adequate competence in different languages by players and trainers. Concerning the new professional figure of the linguistic and cultural mediator, his tasks could cover the following needs:

- managing communication within multilingual and multicultural teams;
- resolving linguistic barriers or cultural conflicts, such as in the case of football banners addressed to new players or trainers;
- assisting players during their process of linguistic and cultural integration in the team and city.
- supporting language tutors in the teaching of football jargon.

Traditionally, football has been a social expression of nationality (Alabarces & Rodríguez 2000), capable of acting as an instrument of community-building through its mass appeal. Modern professional football has witnessed a change also due to the regular practice of trading football players for large sums of money. This increasing commercialization sees professional players move frequently to different host countries as *elite migrants* since they often command high salaries. As a result, this working environment can have a real ethnical mix and be truly multilingual. Whether the social discursive practice of football can become truly cosmopolitan and inclusive is a matter of the extent to which individual and collective multilingualism is efficiently managed and language diversity celebrated by knocking down language barriers.

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