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The Language of Soccer – a Sociolect or a Register?

Abstrakt (Język piłki nożnej – socjolekt czy rejestr?). Podstawę teoretyczną rozważań w niniejszym artykule stanowią poglądy polskich i anglosaskich socjolingwistów dotyczące pojęć *socjolektu* i *rejestru*. W zasadniczej części tekstu autor charakteryzuje pokrótce język piłki nożnej, wyróżniając 10 pododmian tego języka, które różnią się między sobą głównie pod względem leksykalno-gramatycznym, jak również stylistycznym. Na koniec zostaje podjęta próba zaszeregowania każdej z omówionych pododmian do grupy socjolektów bądź rejestrów.

Abstract. The theoretical framework of this paper is based upon the views of Polish and Anglo-Saxon sociolinguists on the concepts of *sociolect* and *register*. In the main section the author gives a brief overview of the language of soccer and distinguishes 10 subvarieties of this language, which differ from each other mainly in lexico-grammatical as well as stylistic features. Finally, the author attempts to categorize each of these subvarieties as either a sociolect or a register.

When it comes to social varieties of language, there have always been terminological problems related to naming miscellaneous subsets of language and placing them within varietal taxonomies. In this paper we will examine the status of the language of soccer and try to define this kind of language by referring it to two concepts, i.e. *sociolect* and *register*. Prior to this, however, we will look at how these two notions were defined and described by Anglo-Saxon and Polish linguists.

In Anglo-Saxon sociolinguistic thought (Holmes 2001; Hudson 1996; Romaine 2000; Trudgill 2003) the term *sociolect* is often used interchangeably with *social dialect* (the latter form seems to be more commonly used and preferred). P. Trudgill defines it concisely as ‘a variety or lect which is thought of as being related to its speakers’ social background rather geographical background’ (Trudgill 2003: 122). In other words, it is the language spoken by a particular social group, class or subculture, whose determinants include such parameters as gender, age, occupation, and possibly a few others.

It appears that Polish sociolinguists (Grabias 1997; Kołodziejek 2006; Wilkoń 2000) have offered more contributions to the theory of sociolect, primarily by postu-

lating taxonomies of social varieties of Polish. On a surface level, the concept itself is understood similarly: sociolects are defined as varieties of national language which are characteristic of particular social backgrounds. Nevertheless, Polish sociolinguistic thought emphasizes one important facet which does not figure prominently in the views of Anglo-Saxon researchers. Namely, the main prerequisite for a sociolect is the existence of a social group whose members maintain strong bonds (professional, social or cultural) established through frequent contacts with each other (Wilkoń 2000: 92). If a sociolect is to evolve, the group of its users must be stable, have an established tradition, and display a sense of differentness from other groups.

Grabias argues that the interdependence between language and society is more prominent in sociolects than in any other varieties of language (Grabias 2001: 239). This is because a social group generates its own language (sociolect), and at the same time this language creates or strengthens the social group in question. To support this point, Grabias (2001) enumerates a few group forming functions of social dialects. First of all, a sociolect assigns prestige to a group. It is also an important identity marker as it helps to distinguish a particular group from others. Lastly, and perhaps mainly, a sociolect, like every language, provides tools for interpreting reality, and imposes on its users an image of the world by strengthening the values that a particular group holds dear¹.

Grabias (1997: 145–159) also proposed a comprehensive taxonomy of Polish sociolects which is based on three controlling variables: professionalism, secrecy and expressiveness. He distinguished between:

1. **sociolects that are primarily occupational** – dominated by the referential function:

a) occupational varieties (uncoded) – professiolects, according to Wilkoń (2000), in which language items are designed to convey thoughts in a precise and effective manner; e.g. the sociolects of hunters, soldiers or sailors,

b) jargons (intentionally coded) – varieties used by groups excluded from society at large, such as criminals or prisoners²,

2. **sociolects that are primarily expressive** – dominated by the expressive function:

a) slang (intentionally uncoded), in which language items are designed to convey emotions or attitudes; e.g., students' or teenage slang,

b) unintentionally coded varieties – created to experiment or play with language; e.g., children's language.

Our discussion of the notion of sociolect would not be complete without Kołodziejek's contribution. She distinguished between *sociolects* and *languages of subcultures* (Kołodziejek 2006: 36–42). While sociolects, just like slang or jargons,

¹ This function comes to the fore especially in the languages of violent groups: a violent group creates a violent language, which in turn reinforces the behavioral patterns of the group (Grabias 2001: 239).

² Halliday (1978: 164) calls such varieties *antilanguages*, which reflect the values of *antisocieties*.

are associated solely with verbal behavior, languages of subcultures should be viewed as much broader concepts as besides language, they embrace typically subcultural attributes, such as: rituals, appearance, dress, etc.

The concept of *register* was developed by Australian linguist M.A.K. Halliday (1978), who made a distinction between *dialect* and *register*. A dialect is a variety according to the user, whereas a register is a variety according to the use. The former is what someone speaks habitually and is primarily determined by such variables as: social class, age or sex. The latter is what someone is speaking at the time and is determined by the kind of activity in which language is being used (Halliday 1978: 35). In other words, it is a variety of language which corresponds to a variety of situation.

Register can be understood in two ways. In a broader sense, it is a variety of language associated with such parameters as: addressee, setting, mode of communication, task or topic. However, some researchers use the term to refer to the specific vocabulary used by various occupational groups (Holmes 2001: 246). For the sake of this paper, we will be referring to *register* in its broader sense as register studies should not be solely restricted to vocabulary. They have to include (and, in fact, they do include) other aspects of language as well. As Ferguson (1994: 20) rightly claims, ‘people participating in recurrent communication situations tend to develop similar vocabularies, similar features of intonation, and characteristic bits of syntax and phonology that they use in these situations’.

Wardhaugh emphasizes a different aspect of registers, referring to them as ‘sets of language items associated with discrete occupational or social groups’ (Wardhaugh 2002: 51)³. As a matter of fact, studies of register variation have focused on the registers employed by specific groups such as, for example, sports announcers (Ferguson 1983), students (Reppen 2001), researchers (Conrad 2001), or even parents using baby talk when addressing their children (Ferguson 1977).

According to Halliday (1978: 33), every register is determined by three variables: **field**, **mode** and **tenor**, which have a pronounced impact on the linguistic features of discourse. Field has to do with the setting in which communication occurs, and includes the purpose and subject matter or topic of the communication process. In other words, this dimension embraces what is being talked about and involves the activity of the speaker and the participant(s) in a particular setting. Mode, in turn, refers to the channel or medium of communication; i.e. the choice between speech and writing. Finally, tenor shows the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. There are two kinds of tenor: personal and functional (Gregory and Carroll 1978: 51–54). The first one reflects the formality level of the situation (how the speakers view each other), whereas the other one is used to show the role that language is playing in the situation (what it is being used for, e.g., to inform, warn, or persuade).

Hudson (1996: 46) uses a handy slogan to refer to the above dimensions: ‘field refers to *why* and *about what* a communication takes place; mode is about *how*, and

³ Most researchers, however, argue that registers are varieties ‘associated neither with groups nor individuals but with the occasions when they are used’ (Brook 1973: 81).

tenor is about *to whom*'. Gregory and Carroll (1978: 27–28) focus, in turn, on the relationship between the register variables and the functions of language. They associate the field of discourse with the ideational function, the mode of discourse with the textual, and the tenor of discourse with the inter-personal. It should also be emphasized that these parameters are interdependent or jointly determined. What it means is that the field of discourse can influence both the choice of the medium (mode) and the formality level of the communication act (tenor).

Due to limitations of space, it would be impossible to elaborate in detail on the theory of register. However, to conclude our brief discussion of this concept, we will refer to two distinctions made by Halliday and Hasan (1991: 39–42). They divide registers into action-oriented and talk-oriented. The former are characterized by the prevalence of non-linguistic activity – there is very little talk and a lot of action (e.g., cooking instructions). In the latter most of the activity is essentially linguistic (e.g., a university lecture). The other distinction has to do with the number of meanings conveyed. Hence, on the one hand, there are closed registers (or restricted languages), where the number of meanings is small and fixed (e.g., the International Language of the Air). On the other end of the spectrum we have open registers which seem to prevail and are much less constrained (e.g., the registers of instructions, transactional registers, and many others).

Before we turn to the very topic of this paper, let us sum up our discussion so far. At first glance it seems that the terms *sociolect* and *register* refer to similar, if not the same, subsets of language. What they definitely have in common is that they both could be subsumed under the heading of social varieties. However, at the same time these two notions accentuate different aspects of language. As has been argued, the concept of sociolect is strongly linked with specific social groups (people sharing the same occupation, hobby, or ideology in the case of subcultures). This language variety has validity only if members of a particular group identify with that group to such an extent that their language is regarded as one of the group identity markers. By contrast, a register is associated with a situation calling for the use of specific language. While registers can facilitate communication, help establish the feelings of rapport with other people, or even express the speaker's identity, they relate primarily to particular occasions rather than to specific social groups⁴. It could then be argued that the theory of register captures the nature of today's communication more aptly than the theory of sociolect, as illustrated by the quote below:

(...) at any moment, an individual locates himself or herself in social space according to the factors that are relevant to him at that moment. While he or she may indeed have certain feelings about being a member of the lower middle class, at any moment it might be more important to be female, or to be a member of a particular church or ethnic group, or to be an in-patient in a hospital, or to be a sister-in-law. That is, self-identification or role-playing may be far more important than some kind of fixed social-class labeling.

(Wardhaugh 2002: 149)

⁴ Interestingly, a register and a sociolect can co-exist side by side in many areas of life, e.g. in armed forces: the military register (language of regulations and instructions, usually written) and army slang (an informal variety used by soldiers).

The language of soccer should be regarded as one of many varieties of the language of sport⁵. As the discipline has gained worldwide acclaim and enjoys enormous popularity in practically every corner of the world, it is an obvious fact that most contemporary languages have developed extensive vocabularies to deal with the topic of soccer⁶. As a field of discourse, this discipline involves a number of spoken and written contexts, such as:

- communication on the field during a game of soccer, which embraces interaction among the players themselves, between the players and the coaches, as well as between the referee and assistant referees, who also communicate with the players and the coaches,
- coaching sessions and drills,
- pre-, post-match and half-time briefings run by the coaches, and involving player responses, as well as dressing room discussions among the players,
- radio, TV, press and online interviews with the players, coaches, officials, and experts,
- radio, TV, press and online match reports, commentaries (some of which can be live) and analyses,
- the rules of the game officially known as the Laws of the Game,
- soccer literature (books on the history of football, guides to soccer events, player biographies, etc.),
- training resources (books, articles, video recordings) and training sessions (workshops, lectures) for coaches, referees, players, and officials,
- fan reactions and comments both in a stadium and in other places (in streets, bars, or at home in front of the television),
- informal discussions about football between fans (face-to-face, or on the Internet).

The above list of communicative situations calling for the use of soccer language is by no means exhaustive (just like it would be impossible to enumerate all contexts of use for other varieties of language). What it is meant to show, however, is that the language of soccer can appear in a myriad of written and spoken situations, which have an impact on language choices. While a substantial number of linguistic items (e.g., basic soccer terminology) will occur in all of the above contexts, these situations will also exhibit differences in vocabulary, grammar and phonology as well as in the degree of formality and range of language being used.

It follows then that the language of soccer is far from being homogenous as it consists of several subvarieties (for now, we will be using this term, refraining thus from assigning any other labels, such as *register* or *sociolect*). Let us discuss them briefly one by one, bearing in mind that each of them deserves to be investigated more

⁵ For taxonomies of the language of sport see Ozdzyński (1979) and Tworek (2000).

⁶ Naturally, since the game in its contemporary version originated on the British Isles, borrowings from English are common in many of these languages.

thoroughly (as a matter of fact, these distinctions will hold true for most of the contemporary disciplines). Though all examples come from English, the taxonomy below could well be applied to practically all modern languages.

1. The language of soccer players and coaches

This subvariety, which is primarily oral and informal, is most heavily determined by situational factors. The range of language depends on the type of activity in which players and their coaches are involved. The length and complexity of messages varies from concise, sometimes one- or two-word commands issued while the players are in action on the field (e.g., *man on*, *pull up*, *out*) to more elaborate utterances used in coaching sessions, or in the dressing room, when players are exchanging comments with each other or their coach. When giving interviews, representatives of both groups in question are bound to use more refined and formal language though the formality level will be dependent on where and when the interview takes place (if it is conducted live right after the match, the interviewees are likely to slip into less formal forms). Soccer players and coaches also tend to use colloquial or slang words and expressions, such as: *nutmeg* – passing the ball through the legs of a defending player, *park* – soccer field, or *knock* – kick.

2. The language of soccer rules, regulations and statutes

This is a formal and written variety which includes elements of legal language. It embraces not only the so-called Laws of the Game, but also the regulations governing soccer competitions conducted at an international and domestic level. These rules are issued by such organizations as FIFA, or UEFA (and its counterparts on the other continents), as well as national and regional football associations. This subset of language also includes statutes of various football institutions. As regards the Laws of the Game, they are written and updated by the International Football Association Board (IFAB) and consist of 17 individual laws which govern a game of football. What follows is an extract from Law 5, which lists the powers and duties of the referee.

The Referee:

- enforces the Laws of the Game
 - controls the match in cooperation with the assistant referees and, where applicable, with the fourth official
 - ensures that any ball used meets the requirements of Law 2
 - ensures that the players' equipment meets the requirements of Law 4
 - acts as timekeeper and keeps a record of the match
 - stops, suspends or abandons the match, at his discretion, for any infringements of the Laws
- <http://www.fifa.com/mm/document/affederation/federation/81/42/36/lotg%5fen%5f55753.pdf>

3. The language of the theory of soccer

Both spoken and written, formal or semi-formal, this variety is used in such contexts as: scientific and popular science publications on football-related issues (coaching, tactics, etc.) or video recordings, workshops, training courses and lectures addressed

mostly to soccer coaches who then try to apply this theoretical knowledge in practice sessions, perhaps using less formal language. Some of these resources are designed to target other groups, e.g. professional and amateur players, who wish to improve their practical skills. Below is a short passage from a resource book for soccer coaches:

4. Elements of play the target game teaches:

Attacking as a Team and as Individuals

- a) Creating Space by running off the ball to receive or to help a teammate receive.
- b) Developing quick support play working angles and distances incorporating switching play using the side players.
- c) Passing long and short to targets and to teammates.
- d) Receiving and turning in tight situations and dribbling in 1 v 1 situations.
- e) Lots of touches on the ball for the players in this practice.
- f) Quick decision making is required in this session because the numbers are small, the area tight and the transitions rapid.

(Harrison 2005: 73)

Elements of this language can also appear in match analyses presented by soccer experts on TV, radio or in the press.

4. The language of TV soccer commentary

Of all subvarieties in question, TV soccer commentary is probably best known to the public at large as even non-fans of football have been exposed to this talk. As is the case with TV sports commentary in many other sports disciplines, this genre is characterized by two kinds of talk: ‘play-by-play description’ 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). These days, TV soccer commentary often involves two people: a professional commentator who gives a detailed live account of the action on the field and an expert (e.g., a coach or a former player), whose job is to summarize and reflect on the game events. It would be difficult to generalize about the style of commentary as it may vary considerably depending on the commentators’ educational background and situational factors. Here is a short transcript of professional commentator talk (for the sake of comparison we will later see how the very same event from the Euro 2000 England-Germany match was described in other media):

Free kick to England ... Owen and Shearer being supported over on the edge of the penalty area by Scholes. Now. Ince goes to join them. Phil Neville trots up from left back. Owen coming in near post. SHEARER GOAL FOR ENGLAND OH AND ONE FROM ALAN SHEARER THE MAN FOR THE BIG OCCASION.

(Tolson 2006: 109)

5. The language of radio soccer commentary

Radio soccer talk exhibits some features similar to the language of TV commentary. However, there is one obvious difference: namely, its recipients (or listeners) can only be exposed to audio stimuli (Tworek 2000: 336), which definitely has an influ-

ence on language use as the amount of information to be conveyed is considerably higher than in TV commentary (naturally, the pace of speech has to be faster). Let us illustrate this with an extract from a radio commentary referring to the match event mentioned in the previous section.

Free kick to England. Beckham to take it. Five yards in from the right touch line Gary Neville's there too (.) er has a word with Beckham. Ince has moved forward so too has Phil Neville on the far side. So five players in attacking positions for England. Beckham swerves it in. Owen goes to meet it chance for SHEARER SHEARER SCORES ALAN SHEARER SCORES FOR THE FIRST TIME IN EIGHT GAMES. A CROSS DELIVERED BY BECKHAM BEAT ALL THE ATTACKERS APART FROM ALAN SHEARER ONE THAT SHOWS CRITICS LIKE ME SHEARER SCORES FOR ENGLAND SEVEN MINUTES INTO THE SECOND HALF IT'S ENGLAND ONE GERMAN NIL

(Tolson 2006: 109)

6. The language of press writings on soccer

This subvariety embraces a number of typical press genres such as: news stories, commentaries, editorials, articles, match analyses and reports. It is difficult to generalize about the language of press writings as the choice of language items depends not only on the genre, but also on the kind of newspaper/magazine (whether or not it is devoted exclusively to sports or football as such, and whether it is a quality paper or a tabloid). It would be definitely safe to assume, though, that in general this variety relies on more formal language than TV or radio commentary. Below is a passage from *the Observer* (a British quality newspaper published on Sundays), which describes how Shearer scored his goal against Germany:

When the breakthrough came it was inevitably from a set-piece. Beckham's curled free kick from the right was intended for Owen, but he, Scholes, and the German defence missed it and the ball bounced once before reaching Shearer, who was never likely to miss with a free header at the far post.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/football/2000/jun/18/match.sport1>

7. The language of Internet soccer portals

The Internet is a relatively recent medium – at least in comparison with the press, TV or radio. If we look at soccer portal sites, we will discover that their language will not be markedly different from the language of the press, which should not come as a surprise since many newspapers or magazines have their online editions. This category also includes all football-related news on the official sites of such institutions as FIFA and UEFA. On the other hand, however, it is legitimate to say that the language of online resources should sometimes be treated as a hybrid of spoken and written varieties. When it comes to football language, a good example of a genre exhibiting such characteristics is a live minute-by-minute match report. What follows is an extract from an online report:

53 min. GOAL! England 1 – 0 Germany Can you guess what happened? That's right, a beautifully deceptive free kick from David Beckham screams past the German backline and onto the head of a diving Alan Shearer. His header finds the far post, and England are up.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/football/2000/jun/17/euro2000.sport>

8. The language of soccer fans

There is no denying the fact that soccer fans attending matches or experiencing them in front of television have developed a special language which should be regarded as a subvariety of soccer language. Fans, who are an important element of practically every soccer event, express support for their favorite team through cheering, which most commonly takes the form of chants or songs encouraging the home team or thwarting the opposition side and its fans. In British football some chants are specific to the supporters of particular teams, others are sung by practically all fans. Below is an extract from *The Celtic Song*, which is played and sung before the kick-off of the Celtic Glasgow home games:

Sure it's the best darn team in Scotland
and the players they are Grand,
"We support the Celtic"
'cos they are the finest in the land.
We'll be there to give the bhoys a cheer
When the League Flag flies,
And the cheers go up 'cos we know the Scottish Cup
is coming home to rest at Paradise.

http://www.nafcsc.com/information/the_celtic_song.htm

Yet the linguistic activity of football fans is not restricted to the oral channel solely; they also express their thoughts and emotions on team flags or banners displayed during matches. Outside the stadium, team supporters communicate their ideas through fanzines, online blogs, and discussion sites (forums). They tend to use informal language, which sometimes becomes abusive when they address fans of hostile teams.

9. The language of referees and their assistants

Partially based on the language of rules discussed above, this subvariety is used in a few communicative situations, each of which may call for the use of different linguistic items. The language used in referee training courses is likely to be much more formal and elaborate than the language used on the soccer field in communicative situations involving the referee, their assistants and the players themselves.

10. The language of the stadium announcer

According to FIFA rules, the stadium announcer's role should be restricted to making short announcements about the conduct of a soccer game. Examples include such formulas as: *Ladies and Gentlemen, please rise for the national anthem of (name of the team)* or *Here's the starting line-up of (name of the team)*. However, in less prestigious, events stadium announcers often go beyond their traditional role and exhort the home fans.

It would perhaps be possible to single out a few more subvarieties of soccer language (e.g., the language of football officials, which to some extent could be regarded as the spoken variety of the language of rules, regulations and statutes); however, they

will contain hardly any features which would mark them off from the subvarieties discussed above.

Let us now refer back to the notions of sociolect and register in an attempt to label the subvarieties of soccer language. It appears that hardly any of them could be subsumed under the heading of sociolect. Most of them should be classified as registers as they are associated with particular situations which require specific language items. This applies mainly to the written subvarieties such as: the language of soccer rules, regulations and statutes, the language of the theory of soccer, the language of press writings on soccer and the language of Internet soccer portals. The language of TV and radio commentators also exhibits characteristics of registers rather than of sociolects. Both of these professional groups have developed a special language with many distinctive features. But for neither TV nor radio announcers this language serves as an identity marker – they use it because the situational context calls for the choice of specific language items. The language of the stadium announcer, which in its classical form is restricted to fixed formulas, could be classified as an example of a closed register as the number of meanings conveyed is relatively small. Likewise the language of referees and their assistants, although in their case the range of discourse can be more or less constrained depending on whether they are refereeing a game of soccer or participating in a training course.

It might appear that the language of soccer players and coaches could be called a sociolect. Yet again, for a few reasons, this subvariety should be regarded as an example of register. Neither soccer players nor coaches constitute close-knit communities whose members forge strong bonds with each other. Given that these days most players often change their club affiliation, it is debatable whether members of particular teams (sometimes coming from various cultural backgrounds) could be regarded as a group with an established tradition⁷. Both football players and their coaches have developed their own slang, which they use primarily in professional contexts (during a game of soccer or in coaching sessions, but not necessarily in TV, radio or press interviews). This kind of language exhibits the characteristics of an action-oriented register.

What we are left with is the language of soccer fans. It would be fair to use the term sociolect to refer to this subvariety of soccer language provided that we restrict it to the ultra groups of particular teams. These groups, unlike ordinary or mainstream fans, constitute subcultures, whose language serves as an important identity marker. Nonetheless, we have to bear in mind that this sociolect displays great variation as it contains a number of items that are team-specific (i.e., they are used by the supporters of particular teams).

Grabias (2001: 237) classifies sports language as a sociolect and treats it as an example of youth language. It would follow then that all varieties of sports language, including soccer language, should also be regarded as sociolects. However, on a clos-

⁷ This does not necessarily hold true for members of other sports communities. Wiertelwski (2005) argues that the language of bikers meets the main criteria for a sociolect.

er examination of the language of soccer, it is legitimate to call it a register rather than a sociolect. This language variety is actually a collection of several subvarieties, which contain some common elements (basic soccer terminology), but at the same time display differences between each other.

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