Notes on the development of speaking styles over decades – the case of live football commentaries

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Abstract: The aim of this paper to retrace the development of speaking styles within the genre 'live football commentary' by exploring several examples of broadcasts for a German audience in a time span of 80 years. It was shown that the affective information is consistently reflected by a pitch rise between one and two octaves during the phases of building up suspense before a goal and with the goal comment often at pitches beyond 400 Hz. Further genre-specific prosodic characteristics include pausing and articulation rate, which can be very different between television and radio broadcasters.

1. Introduction

1.1. Aims of the paper

Two main functions of prosody are used in a particular way in live football commentaries (henceforth LFCs): the expression of affective information (including attitude) and the construction of spoken genres (cf. Tench, 1996). For affective information prosody and the tone of voice during speech play very important roles. In addition, affect bursts (or raw interjections) can serve this function in an effective way. The prosodic shapes of various genres, styles and registers are bound to speech and have developed over time in their various forms. Regarding the genre LFC, the stylization of the 'goal roar' can be very different between cultures and languages: many Latin American commentators will use an extremely long vowel in the word "goal", often exceeding 10 seconds and longer, whereas such an extraordinary vowel lengthening would be considered as eccentric and overexcited and thus as completely inappropriate in other countries. It is the aim of this paper to retrace the development of speaking styles within the genre LFC by exploring several examples of broadcasts in a time span of 80 years.

1.2. "Invention" of live commentaries

The genre 'live football commentary' is a type of spoken text that came up with the distribution of the radio (starting in the 1920s) and later also in television (starting mainly in the 1950s). Before LFCs became the spoken genre with the most widespread audience for television (TV) in the world (reaching billions of people for a final of a men's world cup) the prosodic characteristics of LFCs changed over time. In this paper the aim is to show the development of LFC characteristics from before the 1950s up to the current decade.

The development of FLCs and other forms of radio broadcasting is closely linked to the invention, the distribution and the usage of the microphone. In the pre-radio days commentaries in general were not made for masses of people who were not witnesses of the commented events. The type of spoken interaction to other humans in live commentaries was something new with the microphone as clearly visible technical requirement for the transmission of the spoken information. Thus, speaking into and to a microphone required a completely new way of preparedness, in the case of live commentaries often linked with
formulations where a preparation is restricted. In the beginning radio days the responsible persons developed some guidelines for "microphoning" (in German "für das Mikrophonieren", see Würzburger (1931) cited after Bose et al. 2013) where the well educated speakers, usually trained actors, got criteria how to speak in a microphone for radio broadcasting.

1.3. Stylistic diversity of microphone speech
Nowadays, in many cultures the use of microphones can be taken for granted for all people, e.g. in telephones. However, the great majority of microphone usage in a huge variety of technical devices concerns the interaction with one (or few) specific persons. These situations of microphone use can be considered as habitualised. This habitualisation of microphone use is in contrast to acoustic recordings for the purpose of scientific analysis in speech communication research. The situation are often unusual for the speakers, the majority of the recordings in the lab make use of prepared read speech and some recordings try to evoke naturalistic speaking conditions of spontaneous and conversational speech. Generally we are confronted with a great diversity of speaking styles where it is often unclear how much of the observations can be influenced by the recording situation (Wagner, Trouvain & Zimmerer 2015).

It can be seen as established that a recording device like a microphone has an influence on the way people speak and use language (when people are aware of the recording). The 'observer's paradox' postulated by Labov (1972) is probably reached at a high degree when untrained speakers with no experience in media communication are asked to speak in a radio or TV broadcast, particularly in a live situation where no cut-out of less perfect parts of the recorded speech is possible. With this paradox of microphone use in mind the professional speakers of LFCs have to do their speaking job for a very huge amount of people making a LFC an acted and an authentic style at the same time.

Live commentaries in sports can display a high level of affective load. The "live" character determined by unpredictable actions on the field and expressed with a "lively" voice of the usually male commentator. In contrast to TV commentaries those broadcasted by the radio have very clear audience design - the commentators can be considered as the cameramen of listeners, and they always give an interpretation of what they see and they consider reportable for the audience.

1.4. Further prosodic styles
The way soccer results are announced in Great Britain is an excellent example of a prosodic design of a speaking style. Bonnet (1980) showed that the information whether the first team won, lost or neither of both was clearly perceivable by the intonation for a huge majority of listeners. If the first team is the winner there is a rising contour on the score, if it is the loser it got a falling contour on the score, whereas a draw is signalled by a limited rise. Although this way of announcement was obviously introduced and popularised by one specific speaker who acted as a role model and 'invented' this style, raised pitch as a signal for victory is also used by commentators in goal jubilation in LFC (Trouvain 2011). Thus, the choice for the pitch contours are not completely arbitrary as already pointed out by Bonnet (1980).

Particular prosodic constructions are also used in horse race commentaries. An analysis of three races in Trouvain & Barry (2000) revealed that the English speaking commentators raised their pitch range in a stepwise fashion (similar to organ stops/registers) over the time course of the race. The effect for the listeners is that the suspense and drama continuously rise with the pitch of the voice. Contrary to the auditory impression of an increased speaking tempo the measured articulation rate was kept constant and the number of pauses increased (sic!). However, the pauses were much shorter towards the end and nearly every pause
contained an audible breath sound. It can be assumed that audible breathing in short pauses evokes the impression of speaking fast and at a high degree of arousal.

Train station announcements belong to spoken genres people are confronted with in everyday life. Gilles (2014) could show with German data how prosody is used for this ritualised activity. Characteristic features are a very high pitch at the beginning of a prosodic phrase, a contrast between phrase-initial speeding up and phrase-final slowing down, low pitch accents, many de-accentuations, specific rhythmical patterns in lists, and segmental hyperarticulations. Sometimes de-accentuation typical for this style runs contrary to information to be conveyed. Particularly in such a decoupling of prosody from the content the ritualisation of this genre manifests itself, (see Gilles 2014: 13).

2. Styles in live football commentaries

2.1. Factors of variation

As Kern (2014) pointed out there are various phases of a game which can be distinguished also prosodically: narration, pre-dramatic phases, suspense and also the climax (goal presentation). Suspense and climax form together the dramatic phase. There are several further factors to be taken into account when looking at the prosodic variation of LFCs.

- Favourization of the team: a goal for the favoured team will be commented with more arousal than a goal against the favoured team.
- Importance of the game: a goal in a friendly game has less importance than in a final in the world cup and will be commented with less arousal.
- Importance of the goal: a 1-0 is more important and has more newness and reason for arousal than, say, a 7-0 with no suspense regarding the result of winning or losing.
- Medium: a radio commentator has to produce more words (and fewer and shorter pauses) to inform the listeners than a television (TV) commentator who just adds verbal information to the pictures.
- Culture: a goal comment in Latin America is different from the comment of the same goal of a German commentator.
- Situation in the game: a goal after an observable attack over seconds has a different suspense-building phase than an unexpected goal.
- Broadcast station: there are tendencies of speakers working for commercial stations to be prosodically more extreme than colleagues of public stations (Walhurst et al. 2013).
- Individuality: prosodic forming is one of the main tasks when performing on stage and during other forms of public presentations. This leads to prosodic differences between speakers.

2.2. Role models

Television broadcast was developed later than radio broadcast and also its popularisation took place at a later time. Consequently, the commentator for TV had as a role model the commentator for radio. However, as pointed out above, the TV commentator works differently than a radio commentator (Trouvain 2011). That means we have two strings of LFCs which have possibly developed independent from each other. Similarly, a divergence between commentators of commercial and public broadcast stations could possibly have taken place. The commercial broadcasting speaker had as a role model the public broadcasting speaker (if public stations were first). In this case the divergence cannot be deduced to the different audience design of the TV speakers. It can be assumed that the
"newer" speakers intend to stage differently, for instance by a more extreme prosody, in order to get more perceptual attraction.

3. Examples
The following examples serve as illustrations for some landmarks in the development of the prosodic styles in LFCs. The main focus is on the scenes that lead to a goal which includes the three phases of i) the pre-dramatic section, ii) the building up of suspense, and iii) the goal comment or goal roar (climax). The determination of the suspense phase was based on the beginning of a perceivable pitch rise which has been shown to be a general indicator (Samlowski et al., subm). All examples are from male speakers commenting for men's football games for a German speaking audience.

3.1. 1930
The example from 1930 is a radio commentary of German versus Italy (result 0-2) that took place in Frankfurt as a friendly game. The commentator uses over-long pauses (more than 2 secs). For the first goal the time between the pre-dramatic phase and the goal consists of nearly three seconds pause without building-up of any suspense. For the now suspense phase of the second goal the pitch rises from 160 to 350 Hz within a single phrase (13 syllables with a high articulation rate) which ends with an affect burst followed by many seconds of silence. The goal comments showed maximum pitch values of 398 and 439 Hz.

An interesting side observation from this 3 minutes excerpt of the entire commentary is that the speaker is not only addressing the unknown masses of public listeners but that he also integrate his comments in conversations with his neighbours in the stadium. These changes also lead to changes of the speaking register in terms of pitch register with a lowered pitch range for the non-distant addressees.

3.2. 1954
The examples from 1954 are two radio commentaries of the world cup final between Western Germany and Hungary (result 3-2). Note that the games between 1945 and 1989 were commented by the public broadcast stations of both German states in this period, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

The first example is taken from the Western German radio commentary on the decisive goal at this world cup final. This audio sample is well known in Germany because it is often used in German television as an index for a transitional point for an economic boost after the post-war years in (Western) Germany. However, the live broadcast of the TV did not take place with this audio comment. The recording from the radio was combined with the film that was broadcasted 1954. In the 1970s, when the new manipulated version was created, the audio information of the film was lost - in contrast to the audio of the radio broadcast. The more lively style of the radio comment superbly suits to underline the journalistic message of the "comeback" of (one half of) a national society.

The liveliness of the Western commentary can be nicely illustrated with the suspense phase which starts at 140 Hz and ends nearly 9 seconds later at 420 Hz, thus spanning a range of two octaves. The goal roar consisting of reduplications of "Tor" (German word for "goal") reaches a pitch of 446 Hz. The articulation rate for the pre-dramatic as well as for the suspense phase is in the range of normal conversations (4.6-4.9 syll/sec).

A very similar picture appears with the commentary from the Eastern German radio station. The suspense phase starts at 216 Hz, but takes with about 5 seconds less time than the colleague from the West. The Eastern German speaker shows even higher extreme pitch values: 458 Hz and the end of the suspense phase and 467 Hz for his production of "Tor".

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Thus, both commentaries are at comparable levels, though the Eastern commentary shows more extreme values. It might be the case that this commentator considered the German team also as the own team.

3.3. 1974
During the world cup 1974 in Western Germany there was also a match between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic (result 0-1). The examples are from TV in both states and from radio in Eastern Germany. Pre-dramatically the commentator of the radio shows both, a phrase with rather many words followed by a rather long pause. The suspense phase is again characterised by many words (with 23 syllables) and only one pause but with a continuous rise from 178 to 286 Hz. The goal roar is at 321 Hz.
For the speaker of the Eastern TV the pre-dramatic comment is completely missing but the suspense phase is similar to horse race commentaries: there is a stepwise climbing of the pitch ranges from phrase to phrase from 170-233 Hz in phrase 1, to 216-330 Hz in phrase 2, and up to 315-382 Hz in phrase 3 where the extreme is reached with 382 Hz for the goal roar. The phrases are between 1 and 3 syllables long and the pauses are between 150 and 800 ms long. The pre-dramatic phase of the Western TV commentator is similar to those found for radio commentators with many words, a high articulation rate and slightly longer pauses. The suspense phase with four phrases (between 1 and 4 syllables long) has a similar stepwise pitch structure as for the other TV commentary. But this speaker starts with a higher register: 231-289 Hz (phrase 1), 292-382 Hz (phrase 2), 331-405 Hz (phrase 3), 378-395 Hz (phrase 4). The goal comment (against the own team) is just “Tor” with 437 Hz as the highest value, followed by silence (but with the acoustic atmosphere in the stadium).

3.4. 1990
The 1990 examples are the radio and TV commentaries of (now reunified) German public broadcast stations. The commented goal is the decisive 1-0 in the world cup final between Germany and Argentina. It is important to note that this goal was shot by a penalty that was preceded with intensive discussions and no action on the field for several minutes. For the commentators it was not the usual way of building up suspense and they also had time to prepare the comments after the goal.
The goal roars were again at extremely high values (351 Hz in radio, 392 Hz in TV). The unusual situation of preparedness leads to longer narrative comments, also for the TV commentator. Interestingly, we can observe now a strong declination: the TV commentator decreases his pitch from 344 Hz to 173 Hz in a discourse unit of a bit more than 13 secs. The radio commentator's declination ranges from 320 to 163 Hz (in about 16 secs) before giving up his turn to his co-commentator.

3.5. 2010
One game in the round of 16 of the world cup 2010 was Germany v. England (result 4-1). Three example commentaries for the 1-0 (as a new and important goal) were selected: from public TV, public radio and from a commercial radio station.
All three commentaries are very similar regarding pitch during their goal roars and during the suspense phase (around 3 secs): TV from 123-393 Hz, climax at 439 Hz; public radio from 180-381 Hz, climax at 414 Hz; private radio from 160-450 Hz, climax at 426 Hz. The main difference between TV and radio commentators lies in the length of articulatory stretches. The TV commentator uses just 7 syllables for the suspense phase in contrast to 19-21 syllables by the radio commentators. The latter also use very high articulation rates between 6.8 and 7.3
4. Discussion

The suspense part seems to work in all inspected LFCs in the same way by a continuous or stepwise elevation of the pitch registers by between one and two octaves. The climax is usually but not in all cases reached during the goal comment. Although there is a large inter-individual variation between 321 Hz (East German radio 1974) and 467 Hz (East German radio 1954) it is astonishing that voices of male adults reach extremes usually known for baby cries or in most extreme situations of stress.

TV commentators share some characteristics such as using fewer words and more pauses in general. But they also apply longer pauses, particularly after the goal roar. Interestingly in two cases the suspense phase was completely omitted by the speaker, one case was from the very early radio days of LFCs.

What we can see from our examples is that the affective information displayed in the dramatic phases of 'building-up suspense' and the 'climax' is very similar in these styles over 80 years. The possibilities of the expression of arousal by pitch seem to be limited (cp. the suspense phase of horse race commentaries described in Trouvain & Barry 2000), at least in the inspected German data. More possibilities for changes in prosodic styles for this genre appear to be in pausing and articulation rate. Both temporal parameters were quite variable across the samples.

It is hard to draw any further conclusions from the rather small database of 12 commentaries investigated here. Thus, an extension of the data collection would be the next step. Such an extension could also include new forms of LFC such as audio descriptions for the blind (Trede 2007) where the commentator is rather close to his audience in the stadium and delivers slightly different information than in a radio broadcast for the time of the entire game.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Frank Zimmerer for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

References


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