

RAYMOND SIEBETCHEU  
(UNIVERSITY FOR FOREIGNERS OF SIENA)

## FROM SOCIOLINGUISTICS TO LANGUAGE TEACHING IN FOOTBALL

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This contribution illustrates some results of the *Multisport Project. Immigration and Italian sport: a multicultural perspective for integration*, activated at the University for Foreigners of Siena in 2012 with the collaboration of the Italian National Olympic Committee of the Tuscan Region. The project, the first of this kind in Italy, was born to question the issues of linguistic-cultural mediation in sports. This project starts from the assumption that sport should not be interpreted only as a game and competition but also on one hand as a cultural product and a tool to encourage the social inclusion of immigrants in Italian society and on the other hand as the enrichment of Italians with respect to the linguistic and cultural heritage brought by foreigners. For this reason, the idea was not only to propose tools that can be used for the purposes of pure scientific knowledge, but above all to demonstrate their application value in support of educational programming and cultural development actions. The research carried out within this project has therefore been dedicated to the management of plurilingual and intercultural contact in professional and amateur teams. In the latter case with attention to asylum seekers. The activities of this project are now part of a research line entitled *Visibility of Immigrant language. Sport and*

*linguistic and cultural integration* within the Center of Excellence of the University for Foreigners of Siena.

A decade after the start of research on the Language and Sport within the University for Foreigners of Siena, taking up some salient points of the results obtained, the contribution aims to illustrate the new challenges and research perspectives on this theme. Although we will focus our attention on football here, it should be remembered that the research is also taking an interest in other sports. For example, several degree theses have been carried out on the topic of language and sport. The contributions of Ricca and Siragusa in this volume, relating respectively to volleyball and athletics, refer to models proposed by the Multisport project.

The first section of this paper provides an overview of some theoretical considerations related to football in the global context and its link with sociolinguistic studies. Particular attention will be paid to the issue of plurilingualism in football, given that it constitutes one of the main effects of the globalization of football. In this work we will use the concept of “Plurilingualism” according to the Common European Framework of Reference perspective (cfr. Council of Europe 2001). According to this document, plurilingualism differs from multilingualism, which is the knowledge of a number of languages, or the coexistence of different languages in a given society.

The plurilingual approach emphasises the fact that as an individual person's experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact (Council of Europe, 2001: 4).

With this backdrop in mind we will prop, also based on previous works to which we will refer for in-depth analysis, the recognition of plurilingualism in football teams as well as the language choices and mediation issues in football clubs. The second part of the article, moving towards a more practical dimension, focuses attention on issues of language education in football contexts by proposing some examples of language games based on the linguistic needs of players-learners, in this case we will focus on a team with players who are asylum seekers.

## 2. FOOTBALL AS CULTURAL SYSTEM AND GLOBAL PHENOMENA

«Football is more than ever part of the sociocultural fabric of global life. Part of its success story resides in its ability to transcend not only national borders, but also barriers relating to class, ethnicity, gender, religion and language» (Bergh / Ohlander 2018: 254). According to Porro (2008), football has long ceased to represent only a game, since today it constitutes a real cultural system and a good litmus test of what happens, more in general, at a social level. For Leith (1998), football is a cornerstone of popular culture. In recent decades this sport, which has also become

a cultural product, is marked by an increasing process of globalization. For these reasons, football is one of the great cultural institutions due to its unique and cross-cultural appeal (Giulianotti 1999). Not by chance, it is considered as «people's game», «world's game», «global game» and «global phenomenon» (Giulianotti / Roberson 2009; Bergh / Ohlander 2018). For Giulianotti and Robertson (2009: 133), football is also «a major component of civil society in most nations». According to the same authors, the diverse, hybrid, and fluid social identities within football, as well as transnationalism and connectivity should be considered as key to the social aspects for globalised football (Giulianotti / Robertson 2009: 134). Armstrong and Giulianotti (1999: 3) add that «football's early development might [...] be considered as a study in one of the earliest forms of cultural globalisation».

This globalization of football, determined by a continuous mobility of players, coaches and team owners (Lanfranchi / Taylor 2015; Poli *et. al.* 2018), is probably one of the main social revolutions of contemporary football. Thanks to this internationalization process, football has certainly become a captivating and loved sport, but at the same time much more complex to manage from the communication point of view. It is therefore appropriate to take into consideration some socio-cultural topics specific to this new revolution of contemporary football, but not yet thematised and systematically analyzed with respect to their impact on language issues. For all these reasons, football should be regarded as contributing significantly to globalization processes, a relevant point in the context of football and football language in relation to superdiversity (Giulianotti / Roberson 2009; Bergh / Ohlander 2018). The spread and globalization of football also entailed the spread of language dynamics in football settings. For this reason, «football language may well be contributing to born transnationalism and global connectivity» (Bergh / Ohlander 2018: 262).

### 3. INVESTIGATING THE SOCIOLINGUISTICS OF FOOTBALL

The Multisport 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) that to enable the team to win, communication should be a priority; sociolinguistics as well as language acquisition research have everything to gain by studying these authentic dynamics, problems as they develop and strategies formulated to offset their impacts. About this, football and football language may provide opportunities for interaction and communication in a variety of superdiverse settings, including digital ones (Bergh / Ohlander 2018: 264). Before focusing attention on issues related to plurilingualism in football and educational issues that derive from it, it is appropriate to briefly dwell on the position of scholars with respect to the sociolinguistics of football.

According to Bergh and Ohlander (2018: 258), due to the relative scarcity of

previous studies it is difficult to identify dominant issues within the larger field of football language. For these authors, a good deal of basic work remains to be done. Referring to the fields which could be covered by sociolinguistic studies related to football, Bergh and Ohlander (2018: 259) mention phraseological, colloquial, and grammatical features of football vocabulary; football metaphors; diachronic aspects of football terminology. Lavric and colleagues (2008) focused on football in media commentary and discourse as well as plurilingualism in football. Leith (1998: 1) describes football language in the following informal way: «[Football language] has many dialects – the language used on the pitch by players is entirely different from the language used in the stands by fans which is completely unlike from that used by the commentators in their gantries, which is again different from that used by the journalists who write about it». With reference to the Italian context, Morani (2012: 223) notes that the language of football interacts with the language of newspapers, which in turn is constantly evolving and always looking for new images and metaphors that can strike immediately and with effectiveness the reader's imagination.

So, looking at football communication from a sociolinguistic perspective, while footballers, fans and officials produce football language in a variety of match (and other) situations, the media – traditional and social – do so even more through their coverage of the game, from live reporting and commentary, interviews and post-match discussions to news articles, written follow-ups, blog forums, etc. All these contexts give rise to different kinds of football language: *official language*, *participant language*, *media language* and *supporter language* (Bergh / Ohlander 2018: 260). The same authors add that the language of football reflects different perspectives in relation to the game as well as showing different degrees of linguistic formality, largely correlating with the spoken-written dimension of the communicative context. Furthermore, we should also consider non verbal communication (body language used by all participants: players, referees, trainers, fans: celebrating a goal, claiming innocence, protesting against referee, ecc.) and paraverbal communication (involving specially referees, players and fans: use of the whistle, Var, flags, players' haircuts etc). Figure 1 illustrates the main sociolinguistic articulations of football language. With reference to the results of *Multisport project*, we refer respectively to the following studies: supporters (Siebetcheu 2019; 2016a; 2016b); sponsor (Siebetcheu 2015); referees (Siebetcheu 2013); players and trainers (Siebetcheu 2016c; 2017a, 2017b).

Closely related to the emergent field of language and migration studies, sociolinguistic research in football contexts should also focus on «informal processes and communicative situations involving football and football language, as well as different groups of migrants» (Bergh / Ohlander 2018: 264). In the Italian context, immigration has had an impact on the football system. Referring in particular to African footballers, Valeri (2005) uses respectively, in the sociological field, the concepts of «neo-calcio ['new football']» and «rivoluzione nera [black revolution]». Vedovelli (2010a), referring instead to the sociolinguistic consequences related

to the presence of immigrants in Italy, uses the concepts of «neoplurilinguismo [‘new plurilingualism’]» and «rivoluzione linguistica [‘linguistic revolution’]». The similarity of these concepts, which however belong to different sectors, demonstrate that migrations change the sociolinguistic dynamics of football and deserve in-depth studies.

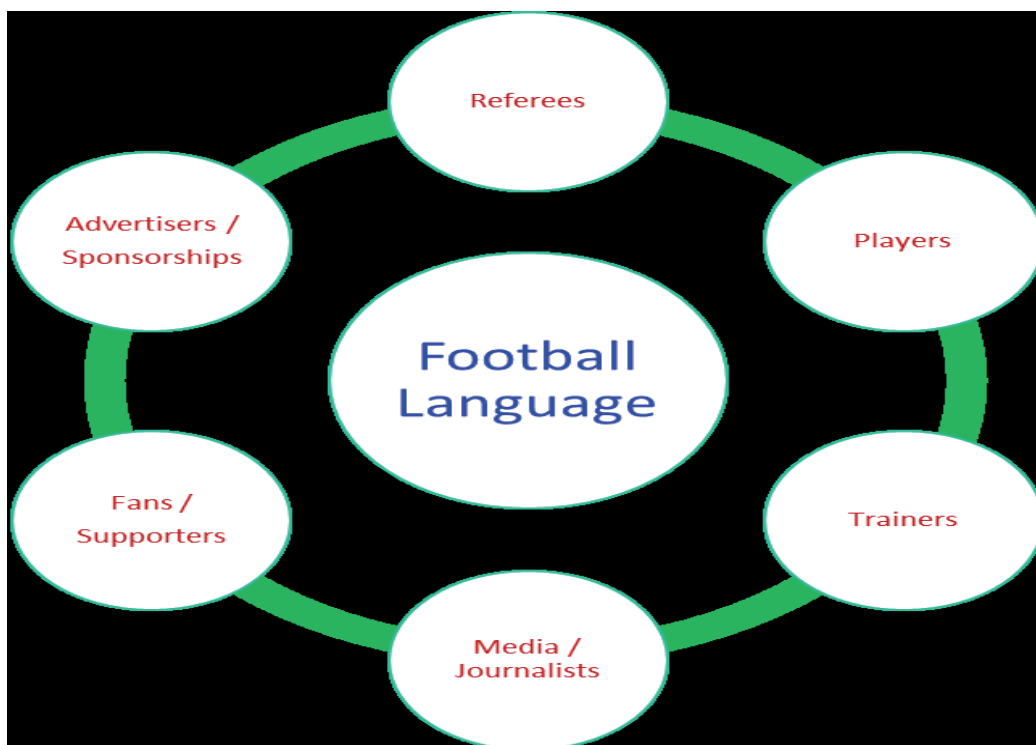


Fig. 1 Sociolinguistic articulations of the football language.

#### 4. PLURILINGUALISM, MULTICULURALISM, MOBILITY AND FOOTBALL: THE STATE OF ART

More than ten years ago within the activities of the *Innsbruck Football Research Group*, established at the University of Innsbruck in 2005, Lavric and colleagues (2008) observed that «only very few works deal with real interaction in team sports [...]. To date, no descriptive study has been done that describes the (linguistic) interaction in multilingual football teams». Referring to their book *Linguistics of football*, the same authors observe that «the very fact that no other article in the present volume focuses on multilingualism phenomena in football teams confirms how little this issue has been addressed so far» (Lavric *et al.* 2008: 377-378). Despite the ubiquitous presence of football-related communication in today's football-obsessed world, football language as a field of linguistic enquiry may be described as under-researched (cfr. Lavric *et. al.* 2008). On the contrary, academic studies on

football in other fields (history, sociology and anthropology) are numerous since the mid-1970s (for a reasoned bibliography see for instance Giulianotti 1999 and Porro 2008). Chovanec and Podhorna-Policka (2009: 187-189) agree with this observation adding that: «surprisingly enough, there has not been much linguistic research into the nature of multilingual communication in sports teams in general and in football teams in particular». For the same reason Bergh and Ohlander (2018: 258) observe that «football language has not been paid anywhere near the attention as a field of academic research that other aspects of the ‘people game’ have received». Referring to the cultural dimension, Maderer and colleagues (2014: 218) add that «although multicultural teams are an important phenomenon in many team sports, little research has been conducted in this area».

All these studies argue that in the past the issue of plurilingual and multicultural teams, despite its importance, has not attracted much attention from scholars. However, in the last decade, some interesting research have dealt with the issue of mobility in global football illustrating some cultural and linguistic repercussions (cfr. Lavric *et. al.* 2008; Giulianotti / Robertson 2009; Ringbom 2012; Lanfranchi / Taylor 2015; Bergh / Ohlander 2018; Lavric / Steiner 2018). 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 plurilingualism within the sports arena. As Ringbom (2012: 186) points out, «a football team can be seen as a special case of a multilingual working environment». A case in point is that of the increasing mobility of professional football players who change clubs very often and are recruited by teams to be more competitive within the football league system. For instance, by recruiting foreign players, many football teams hope to benefit from the specific strengths of individuals with different cultural backgrounds. Football players with different origins often have diverse skills (Lanfranchi / Taylor 2015). For example, German clubs put more emphasis on discipline, power, and efficiency; Italian clubs are well known for their good tactical skills, while in Brazil technical skills are more important (Müller 2009: 273). Therefore, international, and multicultural teams hope to increase their chances of success by diversifying the physical, technical and tactical characteristics of their players. But does this principle work?

Maderer *et. al.* (2014) argue that in some cases cultural diversity has a positive impact on team performance, but in other cases it does not. Analyzing the state of the art on these issues, the same authors note that the answers to this question are not unique because the methods of data collection and the parameters chosen by scholars are different. For example, the performance of a football team on the one hand can be linked to subjective responses and on the other, if it is decided to examine the quantitative data, it can be analyzed from different points of view: trophies won, outcome of matches (won, lost or tied), goals scored or conceded, sponsors, market value, fans, etc.

Apart from technical and tactical objectives, an important fact refers to linguistic dynamics in the teams. While plurilingualism is nowadays considered a valuable asset, it could create language barriers within professional football teams where communication is a make or break issue. For example, members of a football team may face the burden of learning a complicated tactical system or a training methodology that poses 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.

Although in football teams it is often feet (and hands, for the goalkeepers) that visibly make the difference, and for this reason they tend to focus more on football talent than on linguistic competence (Kellermann *et al.* 2006), recent studies in professional teams have shown that players who have difficulty to communicate fluently with teammates and coaches fail to give their best, at least in the first few weeks (Lavric / Steiner 2018). Studies that have focused attention only on the impact of cultural diversity on team performance reveal that while on the one hand it can be an advantage (Andresen / Altmann 2006), on the other hand these positive effects are not so evident in all the teams (Brandes *et al.* 2009). According to Chovanec and Podhorna-Policka (2009: 192), most of the time players interviewed uniformly not admitting to any problems or situations of miscommunication. For these authors, the general “no problem” attitude of football players is due to the fact that they do not like to manifest publicly their communication experience within the team. Moreover, players are often able to predict the content of the communication just from the given situation and body gestures. Chovanec and Podhorna-Policka (2009: 192) add again that a part of the “no-problem” attitude is also connected with the generally informal atmosphere in football clubs, where players will willingly help each other linguistically because their individualism needs to be harnessed for the benefit of the team. It is probably for this reason that Thaler (2008: 391) considers that «football and English are the only truly global language».

Studies in Italy (Siebetchu 2013; 2016c; 2017b), in Austria (Lavric 2018 *et. al.*; Steiner / Lavric 2012) and elsewhere reveal that linguistic competence is important for managing complex problems in football teams. Furthermore, it is important to consider that plurilingualism 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). The awareness of language dynamics and cultural needs in professional football teams is decisive in preparing players and coaches to settle as soon as possible culturally and linguistically in the new team. Professional teams



cannot afford to wait for players, often paying significant transfer fees, to become linguistically autonomous after 6 months (practically a season) as would be the case with typical foreign students who start learning the language as beginners. For the same reason, it should 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: 144). Also, for this reason, football can be an excellent tool to promote languages not only in the football teams but also in everyday life. Football, and the languages of its professional players, can therefore be considered as the paradigm of a society called to see linguistic and cultural diversity not as a barrier but as a normal and natural process. Maderer *et. al.* (2014: 233) conclude their research observing that «promising direction for future research would be to have a closer look on the impact of language on team processes and sporting success». The same authors add that «Football requires intensive communication among the team members on the field as well as with the coach. Thus, it can be expected that language skills of players and coaches may moderate the relationship between the cultural diversity of a team and team success in a positive way» (Maderer *et. al.* 2014: 233). This Maderer and colleagues's conclusion and wish is the aim of our research.

## 5. PLURILINGUALISM IN FOOTBALL: A METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Within the *Multisport project*, the way of obtaining data have included five stages based on quantitative and qualitative survey in an interdisciplinary perspective through field research. The project used mixed methods: a) collection of demographic data; b) sociolinguistic questionnaire; c) semi-structured interviews; d) participant observation; e) autoconfrontation; f) electronic media sources such as online newspapers.

The demographic data collected are useful to propose a demolinguistic mapping of football leagues (in our case *Serie A*: Italy's premier football league competition). For the collection of these quantitative data, reference has been made to the official sites of all clubs, but also to two reliable, accurate and very updated football databases: *CIES - The International Centre for Sports Studies - Football Observatory* and *Transfermarkt*. On the basis of the demographic analysis of foreign players, five indicators were introduced to illustrate demographic features of football players and have first indications to mapping football players languages, 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 Serie A Italian professional league. 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.

Teams	Presence	Incidence	Origin	Heterogeneity
Atalanta	20	66,66%	15	16
Benevento	10	33,33%	10	14
Bologna	24	82,25%	16	20
Cagliari	17	54,83%	12	15
Crotone	15	48,40%	12	15
Fiorentina	16	59,25%	11	13
Genoa	17	47,22%	12	15
Hellas Verona	19	55,88%	16	20
Inter	18	66,66%	14	20
Juventus	16	69,56%	13	16
Lazio	25	78,12%	19	23
Milan	19	70,37%	17	22
Napoli	21	80,76%	17	22
Parma	20	55,55%	14	17
Roma	18	72,00%	11	13
Sampdoria	15	57,69%	13	15
Sassuolo	16	57,14%	13	19
Spezia	16	45,71%	14	17
Torino	17	56,66%	11	17
Udinese	27	84,37%	15	18
<b>Totale</b>	<b>366</b>	<b>61,51%</b>	<b>73</b>	

**Tab. 1** Demo-statistic findings on foreign football players in Serie A (season 2020-2021).

The data of tab. 1 are slightly different from the one of *Transfermarkt* from which we collected them because we also consider “foreign players” either those who acquired the Italian citizenship, or the one holding multiple citizenships. Actually, the data referring to the nationality of origin or to the different citizenships of players are useful to show the potential languages spoken by these players.

Overall, findings show that out of the 366 foreign players (coming from 73

countries) in the 2020-2021 Serie A, the Udinese team has the highest number of foreign players (N=27). Based on the indicator of incidence, more than half of the total number of players (61,51 %) come from foreign countries in Serie A. Even in this case, Udinese has the highest percentage of foreign players (%=84,37). As for origin, most of the players of the Serie A come from Latin America. Brazil and Argentina are the nationalities with the highest number of players in Serie A, respectively with 29 and 28 players (tab. 2). Many players also come from Spain, Serbia and Croatia. Moreover, the highest indicator of dominance is found in the Serie A team of Roma with five Spanish players corresponding to 27,77% of foreign players. AS Roma and Fiorentina are the teams in Serie A with the lowest indicator of heterogeneity counting respectively 13 nationalities. Still referring to the season 2020-2021, Lazio is the team in Serie A with the highest indicator of geographical heterogeneity counting 23 nationalities. An emblematic case of the geographical heterogeneity of players is that of the Franco-morocco-senegalese, Konko Abdoulay, former player of Lazio. The player was born in France from a Senegalese father and a Moroccan mother and therefore possessing three passports. All this demostatistic information gives an idea of cultural and language diversity in football teams and allows reconnoitering plurilingualism in football teams. The data on languages in this work were collected by sourcing the Ethnologue digital database, an online comprehensive catalogue of the world's known living languages ([www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com)).

Nationalities	Number of players	Nationalities	Number of players
Brazil	29	Ivory Coast	13
Argentina	28	Uruguay	12
Spain	21	Poland	11
Serbia	19	Romania	10
Croatia	16	Colombia	9
The Netherlands	14		

**Tab. 2** *Top 11 foreign nationalities in Serie A (season 2020-2021).*

The sociolinguistic questionnaire, with open-ended and closed-ended questions, has been submitted to many sports managers and 35 foreign footballers playing in professional (including AS Roma, Udinese calcio, Siena calcio, Palermo calcio, Fiorentina, Empoli calcio and Frosinone calcio) and amateur leagues. This tool aims to collect the information provided directly by respondents. Thanks to this method, it has been possible, for example, to overcome the rigid association between language and nationality, but also the mechanical link between nationality and culture. The questionnaire allow us to analyze the perception of the respondents in relation to languages and to illustrate the individual linguistic repertoires of the respondents taking into consideration their individual experience (languages used at home and in

the society, languages learned at school, etc.) and professional experience (languages learned during the football career).

The use of electronic media sources such as online newspapers offered direct evidence of the linguistic skills of players / coaches as well as the difficulties encountered on the path of linguistic and cultural integration, but also strategies for managing and overcoming cultural barriers. The concrete examples that players and coaches give about misunderstanding cases during matches, training or in other contexts are useful to understand the language choices in the teams. According to Chovanec / Podhorna-Policka (2009), thanks to informations coming from the media (previous interviews, club web pages, personal histories of players, online fan pages, etc.) «the pool of general questions in the questionnaire can be tailored more precisely to a particular interviewee, with some questions weeded out as irrelevant and others added in other to reflect the specific situation and experience of the player» (Chovanec / Podhorna-Policka 2009: 189). However, the same authors add that «when ask about their linguistic behaviour, respondents may give what they think are the expected answers or downplay problems of multilingual communication in order to present themselves – though not necessarily consciously – in a more positive light» (Chovanec / Podhorna-Policka 2009: 193). It is precisely for this reason that our analysis is not limited only to this type of tool.

The semi-structured interviews, addressed to some players, coaches, international referees, language teachers/interpreters allowed to gather more in-depth information regarding language and cultural dynamics in football contexts. The participant observation, which took place in an asylum seeker (cfr. Siebetcheu 2017a), dealt with the analysis of the visibility and vitality of languages in real interaction according to three indicators: spoken, written and nonverbal data. This method is therefore based on language choices and language visibility in the stadia. We based this method on the Holmes (1992) theory about language choices. According to her, topic, setting and participants should be involved in the language choice process. Language chosen by speaker is influenced by social context: those who are talking, where they are talking, what they are talking about, and why they are talking. These aspects are very important in football setting. In this work I will focus on the first two indicators.

The autoconfrontation method (cfr. Faïta / Vieira 2003; Boubée 2010) is based on collecting data through interview after participant observation. This method aims at shedding light on the relation between real activity and represented activity. The players of the refugee team we have observed for more than one year have been confronted with themselves about their language behaviors and choices during football matches. This method focuses on language and consciousness, valorization of immigrant languages on the pitch and motivation and learning of foreign languages.

## 6. PLURILINGUALISM MODELS IN FOOTBALL TEAMS

The crucial issue of plurilingualism and language barriers in professional football leagues can be tackled through the four models, namely, *Toscane Favelle versione Albero di Natale* model (TFAN), *Pentecoste in Campo* (PC) model, *Tiki Taka Linguistico* (TTL) model and *Zona Mista* (ZM) model.

### 6.1 TFAN model

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 refers on data collection of languages based on nationalities in specific leagues or teams. The analysis recorded 366 foreign players from 73 countries in the Italian Serie A spoke 42 official languages during the season 2020-2021. Referring to the same season, figure 2 illustrates the mapping of the 11 most used languages in the Italian Serie A.

Thanks to this model, Spanish has been found to be the language with the largest number of speakers in Serie A league (86 speakers). Therefore, Spanish, placed at the base of the tree, can be seen as the most rooted idiom in the Serie A football league, functioning in similar ways to «immigrant languages». Bagna *et al.* (2003) distinguish these from «migrant languages» as they are well rooted in a 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 during the transfer market. In the last few decades, every time Spanish-speaking players transferred from Italy to other leagues, other ones have arrived. So, their numbers therefore have always remained very high.



**Fig. 2** *TFAN model: 2020-2021 Serie A.*

The asset of this model is that it offers a mapping of the languages most widely used in the football league. Thanks to this model, clubs, referees, journalists, and all employees have an idea of the languages in which they should invest to manage communication on and off the field with players and coaches. The TFAN model allows, in fact, football clubs to identify the languages on which teams could base their language policies or strategies in terms of welcoming, integration, interaction and linguistic-cultural mediation.

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' plurilingualism as it reductively determines languages solely on the basis of the variable of nationality. As Barni (2008: 224) points out, «since a group's demolingistic 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' plurilingualism:

- a) player's individual experience, including childhood, family, school education;
- b) player's professional experience in terms of football carrier. These factors are addressed by the PC model.

## 6.2 PC model

Referring to the two sacralized episodes *Babel* and *Pentecost*, declining them from a linguistic point of view, Vedovelli (2010a) associates *Babel* with plurilingualism as a barrier and *Pentecost* with plurilingualism as an asset. The PC model 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.

With this model we aim to reconstruct the linguistic heritage and biography of players on the basis of their individual and professional experience. If, as far as the player's professional experience is concerned, we only analyze the linguistic heritage accumulated during his football career, as regards the individual experience, we highlight five parameters that are appropriate to demarcate linguistic data to be used to analyze the overall linguistic space of foreign players: place of birth, country of origin, languages used in family, languages learned at school, citizenships. Unlike the TFAN model which only limited itself to illustrating the collective plurilingualism of the league by identifying the languages on the basis of the nationalities, the advantage of the PC model is that it focuses on the speakers and allows to map the individual plurilingualism of players thus expanding the range of languages potentially present in the team. Figure 3 shows for instance the degree of plurilingualism of our informants. We can observe that 13 of the thirty players examined declare to speak four languages and seven players can use five languages. Football teams are therefore an opportunity to learn languages.

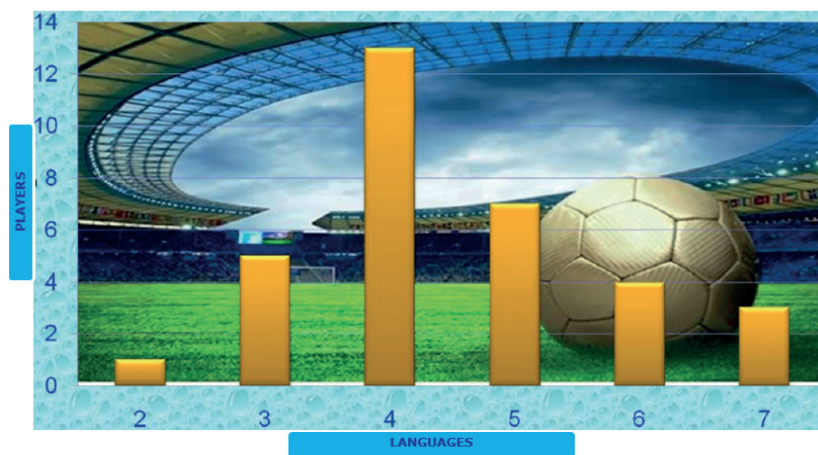


Fig. 3 Respondent's degree of plurilingualism.



This model also allows to analyze the linguistic competence of the players on the basis of their self-declarations. The plurality of languages often generates a linguistic asymmetry in football teams due to the fact that the degree of linguistic competence in a specific language is not distributed evenly among the team members (Losa 2013: 45).

Applying, for example, this model to African players, from our survey it emerges that of the 11 respondents examined, only two declare that they can read and write their local languages. This situation is due to language policies in African countries where in many cases only former colonial languages are used at school and therefore are well known in writing and speaking by our respondents. The situation of African players and probably of players of many other nationalities could be associated with the so-called «incipient bilingualism» (Diebold 1961, quoted in Orioles), also underlined by Macnamara (1967), who considers as a bilingual speaker anyone with minimal competence in one of the four linguistic skills, that is to understand, speak, read and write in a language other than L1.

Figure 4 shows the database used for monitoring linguistic data of the players. As we can see, the database is divided into three blocks. The first one provides information regarding personal and technical data of player; the second block illustrates the player's soccer career; and the third block focuses attention on the linguistic repertoire of the player, that is, on languages used by the players in the various contexts (family, school, teams, etc.) with the related skills. Here we analyze the linguistic profile of Miralem Pjanić, former Serie A footballer speaking the most languages. For having played in 6 teams [Schifflange 95 (2000-2004), Metz (2004-2008), Olympique Lyon (2008-2011), Rome (2011-2016), Juventus (2016-2020) and Barcelona; from 4 countries (Luxembourg, France, Italy and Spain)], the Bosnian footballer came into contact with at least five languages (French, Italian, Luxembourgish, Catalan and Spanish) as part of his professional career, in addition to the official language of his country (Bosnian), as well as the languages of education of Luxembourg (Luxembourgish, French, English, German), where he grew up, and the languages used at home. The linguistic profile that we illustrate here was provided by the footballer when he was still playing in AS Roma. For this reason Spanish and Catalan could be considered as new potential languages of this player.

**Le lingue dei calciatori stranieri**

**Profilo giocatore**

Rilevatore: Rav  
 Data rilevazione: 27/08/2015  
 Squadra: Roma  
 Serie: A  
 Cognome: Pjanic  
 Nome: Miralem  
 Nazione: Bosnia Erzegovina  
 Ruolo: Centrocampista  
 Età: 25  
 Altezza: 180  
 Peso: 74

**Carriera calcistica**

**Squadre precedenti Stagioni**

Metz	1 anno
Olympique Lyon	3 anni
Roma	4 anni

**Foto giocatore**

Note:  
 È in possesso di due cittadinanze: bosniaca e lussemburghese, paese nel quale si trasferì con la sua famiglia poco dopo lo scoppio della guerra in Bosnia. Tra le lingue usate in famiglia dichiara di usare il bosniaco e il francese.

**Repertorio linguistico**

Lingua	Abilità	Competenza	Abilità	Competenza	Abilità	Competenza	Abilità	Competenza
Lingua origine 1: Bosniaco	PARLATO	bene	ASCOLTO	bene	SCRITTURA	bene	LETTURA	bene
Lingua origine 2:								
Lingua nascita: Bosniaco	PARLATO	bene	ASCOLTO	bene	SCRITTURA	bene	LETTURA	bene
Lingua famiglia: Bosniaco	PARLATO	bene	ASCOLTO	bene	SCRITTURA	bene	LETTURA	bene
Lingua educazione 1: Tedesco	PARLATO	bene	ASCOLTO	bene	SCRITTURA	bene	LETTURA	bene
Lingua educazione 2: Inglese	PARLATO	bene	ASCOLTO	bene	SCRITTURA	bene	LETTURA	bene
Lingua cittadinanza 1: Bosniaco	PARLATO	bene	ASCOLTO	bene	SCRITTURA	bene	LETTURA	bene
Lingua cittadinanza 2: Inglese	PARLATO	bene	ASCOLTO	bene	SCRITTURA	bene	LETTURA	bene
Lingua calcistica 1: Francese	PARLATO	bene	ASCOLTO	bene	SCRITTURA	bene	LETTURA	bene
Lingua calcistica 2: Italiano	PARLATO	bene	ASCOLTO	bene	SCRITTURA	bene	LETTURA	bene
Lingua calcistica 3:								
Lingua calcistica 4:								
Lingua calcistica 5:								
Lingua calcistica 6:								

Record: 14 di 39 | Nessun filtro | Cerca

Fig. 4 Pjanic linguistic's profile (season 2015-2016).

Figure 5 shows another representation of football players' individual plurilingualism. This figure focuses on the professional experience of Swiss football player Reto Ziegler and show that he learnt or improved his language competence during his professional career. It is interesting to observe that apart from Italian, Russian and Turkish that he learnt respectively thanks to football (Juventus, Sampdoria, Sassuolo, Fenerbahçe, Lokomotiv Moskow), he also learnt other languages thanks to other contexts, for instance family, schools and the fact that he comes from an official plurilingual country. Actually, he posits that he speaks many languages because he was born in Ginevra where French and German are official languages. He also learned English at school and improved his level in this language when he played in Great Britain and now in the USA. He declared that he learnt some words of spanish thanks to his girlfriend.



Fig. 5 Ziegler linguistic's profile (until season 2013-2014).

Figure 6 illustrates the linguistic description of the 2020 UEFA Europa league final Sevilla - Inter Milan based on the PC model but limited only to the official languages of players, to the ones learned within their football career and to some information provided by players. These linguistic data are therefore to be considered partial but reveal that at least 13 languages were present on the field during that game and consequently illustrate the potentially linguistic combination useful to manage communication among players, coaches, and referees. The figure 6 also reveals that the Belgian player Romelu Lukaku is probably the Serie A footballer speaking the most languages. Actually, he declared to speak the following 8 languages: Lingala, French, Flemish, English, Portuguese, German, Spanish and Italian.

Considering the limits of self-declarations in sociolinguistic research, from the PC model we are unable to ascertain the languages used in the field (but also in everyday life). Hence the need to propose a model capable of responding to this need.



**Fig. 6** PC model: 2020 UEFA Europa league final Sevilla - Inter Milan.

**Legend:** ARA: Arabic; CRO: Croatian; DUT: Dutch; ENG: English; FLE: Flemish; FRE: French; GER: German; ITA: Italian; LIN: Lingala; SLO: Slovenian; SPA: Spanish; POR: Portuguese; TUR: Turkish.

### 6.3 TTL model

Tiki Taka is a Spanish style of play in football characterised by short passing and movement, working the ball through various channels, and maintaining possession.

The TTL model aims to explore, on the basis of participant observation, the linguistic daily life of the players on the pitch by observing the effective use of their languages. Basically, the model allows us to observe how much and when the languages indicated in the TFAN model, self-declared and self-evaluated by the same players in the PC model, are actually used by players or by people with whom they interact. The model also allows us to analyze verbal and non-verbal texts used by players. Figure 7 illustrates an example of TTL model, also discussed in 7.1.

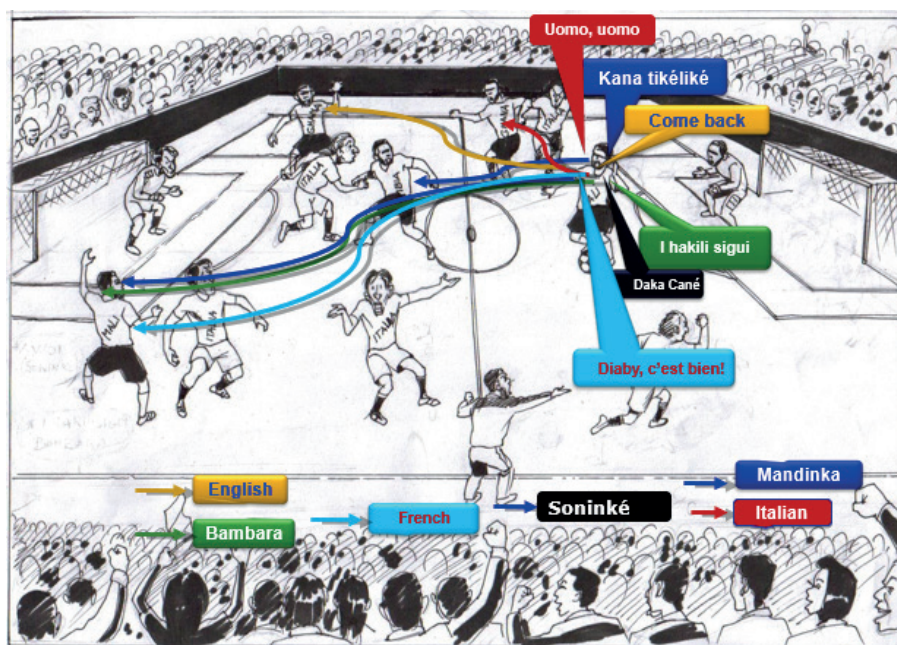


Fig. 7 Illustration of TTL model.

#### 6.4 ZM model

In sports jargon, the mixed zone refers to the area in which athletes, through short interviews, answers to journalists at the end of the game. In analogy to this concept, ZM model aims at analyzing the language choices of players on the pitch at the end of the game together with players. Figure 8 illustrates the words used, in 8 languages, during a training match by asylum seekers players. In the perspective of Labov (1972), the interactions on the pitch have been recorded unbeknownst to the players, thanks to the fact that the researcher was on the field together with the players as trainer. Players therefore interacted on the field with ease and light-heartedness. The recognition of languages took place at the end of the game during the interaction with players who gave permission to use the registration, however anonymous. The spontaneous data collected have therefore not been minimally distorted, as often happens, by the observer's influence on the linguistic behavior of the players on the pitch.





during the games or the training sessions. The use of interpreters is the first tactical choice that coaches make to illustrate their game systems to the team. A good example to illustrate this case is the one of Samuel Eto'o. This former striker of Barcelona, Inter Milan and Chelsea, 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» (cfr. Siebetcheu 2017b). Some plurilingual coaches choose to illustrate their technical and tactical system in the languages of players. Heinz Peischl, for example, when training in Switzerland, chose to use simultaneously five languages to explain his tactics to all players. Losa (2013) analyzed the linguistic situation of the Under 21 Swiss national team: since the team was plurilingual (with French-speaking, Italian-speaking and German-speaking players), even if German was the language with the largest speakers, the coach frequently declared to alternate using the three languages. We report the example proposed by Losa (2013: 46).

(1) Trainer turns to players

[...] okay sie schauen di stehende baele, ist gut?

Keine andere fragen?

Pas de questions?

Tutto è chiaro?

Wir schiessen mit die bilder.

Language choices for tactical reasons are also made by players using their languages during the matches. We observe this strategy in the asylum seekers team made up of Malian, Nigerian, Ghanaian, Guinean and Gambian players. It is interesting to note that these players, also thanks to the use of African languages, make linguistic choices so as not to make themselves understood by their opponents on the pitch and at the same time to manage intercomprehension among them. Actually, after the partition of these countries from the former colonies, their populations are now considered as a continuum of culturally and linguistically related peoples. For example, while Malian footballers turn to their Gambian teammates in Bambara language, the latter understand and answer in Mandinka. Bambara and Mandinka are in fact two idioms belonging to the group of Mandingo languages, generally mutually comprehensible. We propose here the example of the linguistic choices of the Malian defender K. towards four teammates during the same game where he used five languages.

(2) K. turns to D. (Mali) and respectively use French, Bambara and Soninké

a. D. c'est bien  
'Well done D.'

b. I hakili sigui  
'Stall the ball'



- c. A woi oné  
'Exploit flanks'

(3) K. turns to M. (Gambia) and uses bambara

- a. Kana tikelike  
'Don't dribble too much'

(4) K. Turns to B. (Ghana) and uses English

- a. Come back

(5) K. turns to T. (Ghana) and uses Italian

- a. Uomo, uomo  
'Man on'  
(Pay attention, your are marked by an opposing player)

These simple examples show how the Malian player uses the language resources at his disposal to manage communication on the pitch and ensure understanding. K. does not speak English and Italian very well but the few words he knows are used efficiently. Despite the spontaneity of K.'s linguistic choices, there is a strong negotiation and mediation ability useful to manage communication during the game and contribute to the good performance of the team.

## 7.2 *Global choice*

In the current football global context, two languages are often indicated as prevalent for regulating communication in football fields: the English language, considered as the language of international communication; and the language of football, considered as a universal language mainly related to the non-verbal communication during the game. It is necessary to note that the use of body language requires a great mastery, also cultural and emotional intelligence because some gestures have a different connotation from a culture to another and can cause misunderstandings. Blommaert (2010), focusing on English, observes that the close link between local and translocal in plurilingual contexts should suggest overcoming «linguistic rights paradigm» where local languages are “dominated” by English, considered as «killer language». A clear demonstration that English is not always the lingua franca in all football teams is what the Dutch footballer De Vrij when he just arrived to Lazio team: «I ask my teammates to speak English but they don't listen to me» (Siebetcheu 2017b). The refusal (or rather the incapacity) to use English was probably due to the fact that in the season in which De Vrij arrived (2013-2014), the foreign players mainly came from Spanish-speaking and French-speaking countries. The lingua franca in a football team cannot therefore be decided by default or on the basis of the prestige of certain languages but must be negotiated each season based on the linguistic resources of the teams.

### 7.3 Inclusive choice

The inclusive choices refer substantially to the use of the language of the country in which foreign players play. These choices can be suggested or imposed by the teams, but they can also be the result of players' personal motivations. With reference to the latter case, we recall the example of the Brazilian player Maxwell. After playing in The Netherlands (5 years), Italy (3 years) and Spain (3 years), a few months after his arrival in the Paris Saint-Germain team in France, the Brazilian player Maxwell declared the following in reference to the learning French: «It's a question of respect for the team. You need to speak French. It is not always easy, especially because we are used to speaking Italian and Portuguese. But we will strive to learn» (Siebetcheu 2017b). In Italy the language learning activities in football teams can be considered as drives towards Italianization by players, even if in teams, especially the professional ones with talented players who have a certain economic weight, other strategies are needed to motivate players to attend language courses. We recall the case of Brescia Calcio which, to force its foreign players to speak Italian, observed the following: «The player who communicates with a foreign language will first be called up and then fined. First with 50 euros in case of infringement, then 100 euro for those who insist» (Siebetcheu 2017b: 162). We also note the case of the Italian coach De Canio, when he was the trainer of Sunderland (England). In addition to prohibiting the use of languages other than English among players of the same country, De Canio imposed language rules on all foreigners, including that of compulsorily learning five English words a day. The language choices for integration do not concern only players but also coaches. Giera *et al.* (2008: 385) recall the example of Dietmar Constantini, who in his experience as technical director was called upon to train a team with 18 players from 9 different countries. Having to deal with new languages very frequently, Constantini declared that rather than using a lingua franca, he preferred to learn as soon as possible the local language of the country in which he trained or, in some cases, the languages of the players.

### 7.4 Affective choice

Affective choices, which we considered as emotions of the soul and sentimental inclination (which are codes) that players use to transmit messages to those who are in or out the stadium. The language discourse produced during the match by players, referees, staff and fans is generally underestimated, but yet it is a language that is practiced in conjunction with the football match and that is a constitutive element (Guerra 2014: 61). Yet the writer Pasolini (1971), had fun comparing the minimum units of the written-spoken language to the *podemi*, as the minimum units of football and represented by the act of kicking the ball. «Who does not know the code of football does not understand the meaning of his words [passages of play] nor the meaning of his speech [set of passages of play]» said Pasolini. There must therefore be a very close relationship between the “ciphers” (players) and the “decipherers” (the

fans in the stands and / or on TV). So, if football is a system of signs, the maximum expression of the poetic act during a game is, according to Pasolini, the goal. For Guerra (2014: 64) it could therefore be asserted that the element of the discourse of football is identifiable in «the fusion of sports elements, that are, *podemi*, and linguistic elements, lexemes and phonemes, which create new basic units that we can define podo-phonemes and podo-lexemes unifying spoken and written football with kicked football». To cite just one example, we recall the messages that the Argentina player Carlo Tevez often sent to the inhabitants of some poor neighborhoods of Buenos Aires when he scored a goal: *la maciel*, *Fuerte apache*, *Ciudad occulta*. The player showed his closeness to these compatriots by lifting the Juventus shirt to unveil alternately the name of the neighborhood printed on the tank top. If Tevez used Spanish to be in touch with his fans, many of African players, although officially French and English speakers, prefer to use their local languages to maintain intimate relationships with their family and compatriots.

### 7.5 Emotional choice

The choice of a language can be done for emotional reasons. During football matches, the emotions of a goal scored or suffered, as well as a foul whistled or not whistled by the referee, are often accompanied by verbal or non-verbal gestures and expressions, which express the feeling of the player or coach. Through the language choices arising from their emotions, players therefore express their thoughts (positive or negative), their intentions and their mood with gestures, words and writings. Sometimes these emotional expressions are insults and curses in the footballer's language. The former Italian referee, Paolo Casarin, recalls an episode that occurred on the field with the former Polish player Zbigniew Bosniek. Casarin says that, in the face of the swearword launched in Polish by Bosniek as a sign of protest, he replied the following: «Pay attention on what you are saying, I understand something in Polish» (cfr. Siebetcheu 2013). Engber (2006) notes in this sense that: «If a player doesn't happen to share a language with the referee, he might yell in his native language just to convey that he's upset». Vincenzo Fiorenza, another former Italian international referee, confirmed that players prefer to use their mother tongues when they get angry or want to insult the referee. Fiorenza also recalls the episode of a foreign player in Italy who insulted the referee in Spanish and who was expelled because the referee knew Spanish.

### 7.6 Democratic choice

Democratic choice refers to the language used by the largest number of players in a given team. This choice is not always well accepted, when the “majority language” is not that of the native players. The case of the Paris Saint-Germain team, when Italian Carlo Ancelotti was the trainer of the club, is interesting to recall. Actually, the use of Italian, the language of the majority of the players, were perceived as discriminatory, because «if you are French, you have less chance of playing» (cfr

Siebetcheu 2017b: 161). Figure 9 illustrates the strong presence of Italian-speaking players in the starting team of Carlo Ancelotti. All the players with Italian flag are Italians or foreigners who played in Italy before joining PSG. This example is very similar to the case of the Catania team at the time of the trainer Diego Simeone. The strong presence of Spanish-speaking players (12 out of 17 foreigners, including 10 Argentina players) in the team during the 2010-2011 season often led the coach Diego Simeone to use Spanish during training and matches. Referring to the season 2020-2021, Fiorentina, Roma and Udinese are the teams with the highest number of Spanish-speaking players (8 players in each team). Taking into consideration the incidence, the highest percentage of Spanish-speaking players is found in the Fiorentina team, corresponding to 50% of foreign players.



**Fig. 9** *Democratic choice in PSG team starting team (season 2012-2013).*

## 8. LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL MEDIATION IN FOOTBALL TEAMS

Language barriers in football 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 teams) and to learn (the duty of players) languages. While in teams as important as AS Roma, new foreign players attend Italian courses, in clubs playing in lower divisions like Siena, as revealed by the staff, «there are not specific language curricula to integrate foreign players». Since only a 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). However, different scholars have observed communication problems in football teams. According to Giera *et. al.* (2008: 379) «unsuccessful communication among players may lead to the formation of subgroups within the team, which also jeopardizes the integration and the personal well-being of a player in his new environment. Furthermore, it can be assumed that this, in turn, influences the performance of both the individual player and the whole team». Players' plurilingualism 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» (Siebetchu 2013).

According to Chovanec and Poghorna-Policka (2009: 192), there are several ways of compensating for language deficiencies: the use of an interpreter, the use of a linguistically more competent assistant to the coach, and physical demonstration during training sessions. For the same authors, knowing the rules of the games, players are used to receiving information in a non-verbal manner and are commonly instructed by means of graphs and strategic illustrations on flip charts and boards. However, interpretation plays a central role in the initial stages of the players' mobility. Actually, trainers need to manage team communication on the field as soon as possible in the language of the country where they work also to gain the team fans' fondness.

Furthermore, in some specific cases interpretation of mediator should not systematically be a third person but could be a trainer or a former player. According to Lavric and Steiner (2012), this role is relating to the community interpreting and seems to be the most widespread and economic solution. The advantage of this option is that the figure employed knows football well, is always present at training and knows well the culture of the club and the country. Furthermore, this figure does not only function as an interpreter, but also as an intercultural guide within the team. The use of this figure allows, in fact, to overcome the limits of the simple interpreter. In both cases (interpreter or intercultural guide) Giera *et. al.* (2008: 386) note that it is appropriate to be balanced. Actually, when the interpreter is a football expert, he has a tendency to add other information (his own) in addition to that said by the coach, when instead he is not an expert, he often produces poor translations:

The interpreter, however, might not know enough about football and hence produce bad translations, or he might know too much and wish to add his own advice and interpretation [...]. In general, even with a very good interpreter, interpreting is not always a good solution when it comes to communicating with the team. It is much difficult to address players through translation, which can never convey the whole of the message with all its emotional connotations (e.g. tone of voice, pitch). Furthermore, in some situations translation might be too slow, for example, when instructions during the game need to be received by the players without any delay (Giera *et al.* 2008: 386).

Very interesting is the case of the German footballer of French-Guadeloupe origin Marvin Compper, speaking five languages (German, Spanish, French, English, and Italian) who has often helped his German compatriot Mario Gómez, during his stay in Fiorentina.

Another figure with language tasks present in football teams is that of the language teacher, used for language teaching of foreign players and coaches, especially in the technical-football language useful to communicate in the team, on the field and out of the field (press conference, medical examination, etc.). In some cases, the language teacher can also play the role of interpreter during press conferences and of translator for the translation of the official documents of the team. If in some teams as AS Roma, thanks to the presence of a language manager, language courses take place inside the stadium, in other teams, such as Fiorentina, players have private Italian lessons. During these language activities, institutions specialized in teaching Italian to foreigners may also be involved: this is the case of the University for Foreigners of Siena which organized the Italian language courses aimed for foreign players of Siena Calcio. Other clubs, such as Udinese Calcio, refer to the figure of tutor who deals with football and non-football activities of the players (management of bureaucratic issues concerning the family: enrollment of children in school, appointment with a doctor, etc.).

The player's agent also has a language role, as well as a legal one, which is very important in terms of communication between the player and the club. In fact, very often a player's agent should translate during the negotiation for the purchase of the player. For this reason, players' agents must be plurilingual, in order to have the opportunity to follow players from different countries and different languages.

Considering the complexity of the interpreting service in a football setting, one of the suggestions we can propose is to move from the interpretation to the mediation. In this case, mediators should integrate their language and cultural competences as well as professional background with new functions and semiotic strategies. Interpreters are not a clearcut 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. So as for Taft (1981: 53) «The role of the mediator is performed by interpreting the expressions, intentions, perceptions, and expectations of each cultural group to the other, that is by establishing and balancing the communication between them. Thus, a mediator must be to a certain extent bicultural».

## 9. LANGUAGE LEARNING AND FOOTBALL

According to our survey, language competences of players do not seem to play a role during the recruitment: players are chosen according to their abilities to fit into a certain position in the team. As for Chovanec and Podhorna-Policka (2009:



191), although language may not have a crucial role in the selection of players, the linguistic environment may, to a certain degree, eventually pre-determine whether a player will remain with a team for a prolonged period of time or try to leave the team soon by transferring to a linguistically (or culturally) more favourable environment. The same authors observe that the activity that players engage in consists of physical action that is linguistically coordinated only very minimally. «While language does play a role in the rehearsing of tactics during training sessions and in pre-match instructions, the actual game relies as much as possible on automated/habitualized physical behaviour, with language having a rather marginal function (e.g. warn to fellow player of an opponent approaching from behind, to signal one's availability for a pass, etc.)» (Chovanec / Podhorna-Policka 2009: 192).

As part of our project, which in addition to professional and amateur footballers (asylum seekers) also involved the Siena sports high school, it emerges that the teaching / learning of languages for this type of audience must also take place while having fun, therefore taking advantage of the playful teaching. It is for this reason that half of the professional players, would like to be able to speak the new language in a month. For these players, the lesson should not last longer than 30-45 minutes. These needs of the players suggest the double challenge facing the teacher: a) set up the short-term teaching meeting in a motivating, playful learning environment so as not to bore the players, remaining as much as possible in the logic of football training; b) follow the principle of modular teaching to give players the opportunity to realize what they have learned in the limited time available. These settings that could be developed in the classroom (with multimedia tools) and / or on the pitch, would allow players to learn while having fun and without boring.

We point out that football is important also for foreign students not necessarily footballers but fans of Italian football. As part of a recent research on Italian language in the world (Coccia *et al.* in press) many respondents from various countries, from Latin America (Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador) to the United States and Mexico, from Africa (Cameroon, Senegal, Tunisia, Egypt, South Africa) to Asia (Iran, China, Japan and India) and from Europe (France, Austria, Malta, etc.) to Oceania (New Zealand) claimed to be attracted to Italy thanks to football. In Cameroon, for example, it was football through the Italy '90 World Cup that opened the doors to the Italian language in the country (Siebetcheu, in press).

Even the results of a recent survey, which involved 948 students from 14 African countries, see football, after cooking and fashion, as the main cultural element that brings Africans closer to the Italian language (Siebetcheu, in press). Several questions from the survey confirm the good position of football. To the question *When I say "Italy" what is the first word that comes to your mind*, football ranks seventh after "pizza", "fashion", "language", "pasta", "music" and "Rome". Even from the answers to the question *What is your favorite Italian celebrity*, we can again notice the importance of football since four of the top ten names chosen by the respondents refer to the

players. After Pausini and Dante, we note in fact Pirlo, Balotelli, Leonardo Da Vinci, Buffon, Bocelli, Totti, Ramazzotti and Benigni.

The language learning activities therefore fit into the perspective of democratic language education (De Mauro 2018) whose goal is to recognize, enhance and exploit the linguistic and semiotic resources of each learner; taking advantage of all learning contexts (formal and informal contexts, inside or outside the classroom). In this perspective, we consider the language class as a «universe of sociality» (Vedovelli 2010b) and a «forest of codes» (Vedovelli 2000: 27). And by plurilingualism we mean the «coexistence of both different types of language (verbal, gestural, iconic, etc.), that is, of different types of semiosis, both of different idioms, and of different rules of realization of the same idiom» (De Mauro 1981: 124). These definitions of “class” and “plurilingualism” can be linked to sport not only as a purely physical activity, but also as a phenomenon capable of transmitting social, playful and educational values through various forms of language (verbal, gestures, movements, body, etc.). In the wake of these theoretical considerations we can mention the perspective of the German pedagogist Koch (1900) who already in the nineteenth century believed that the essential component of education is found on the playing field, as the game offers a moment of estrangement from everyday life and a peaceful coexistence. Another pedagogist, the Italian Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, although not referring specifically to sport, remembered, over a century ago, the role and value of plural language education. He argued that «Educating linguistically is neither more nor less than educating for originality» (Lombardo Radice 1913: 192). These suggestions imply the need for teachers not to limit themselves to frontal lessons, but to foresee other activities capable to involve and stimulate the learner also through playing and movement. Outdoor teaching / learning, in fact considers the speaker / learner as the subject of a social process that sees him interact with other subjects in social contexts (Vedovelli 2010b).

Teaching methods that we have proposed on the basis of the needs of players and which have been illustrated in detail in Siebetscheu (2016a) are the following: cooperative learning, which allows to develop language skills through communicative interaction between peers; multisensory learning, which allows the development of teaching activities capable of creating combinations between concrete and abstract, language and movement, verbal and non-verbal language, as well as between the various sensory modalities. On these modalities are based the Krashen (1982)’s so-called *Forgetting principle*, which allows the learner to learn while having fun and forgetting that they are studying in another language. Freddi (1990: 24), for his part, illustrates the role of sensory channels in linguistic education activities, arguing that: «when teaching becomes bisensorial – as with audiovisual – or even, if possible, multisensory thanks to the manipulation-exploration of objects and things, the learning experience becomes more complete and productive». Examples of frequently used methods include *Total Physical Response*, based on the integration of language

and movement. This method naturally supposes the development of recreational activities, made fundamental by its global and holistic nature (Freddi 1990). Ekwall and Shaker (cited in Caon 2017: 10) argue in this regard that «people remember 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, 50 % of what they hear and together see, 70% of what they say and 90% of what they say and do».

Through the concept of language-games, Wittgenstein (1953) reflects on sport, considered as a rule and non-rule paradigm, related to language uses. He observes that if in tennis there are very precise rules that must be respected, many rules are not completely regulated (for example, it is not clear how high or with what force the tennis ball can be thrown). Therefore, for him, apart from specific rules many other rules are determined by unwritten habits. In the same vein, Migliorini (1941) uses swimming to describe language as an ability that distinguishes itself from the theoretical and abstract knowledge of the rules which, according to him, are not useful if the practice is neglected. The idea of openness in language education is further expressed by Simone (1976) who argues that educating linguistically means not only educating to languages and their learning, but above all educating to learn codes and the many (infinite) symbolic forms of which a human being can equip himself: it is ultimately an education to language in its plurality.

We briefly illustrate some language teaching proposals developed in classroom and on the pitch as part of a six-month Italian language course for asylum seekers players, many of whom had low education levels. Figure 10 illustrates some language activities developed in classroom with multimedia tools (PowerPoint, with the possibility of inserting photos, audio and video files that could be easily customized according to the interests of the students). The lessons mainly referred to the students' favourite players and teams. The goal was to achieve lexical and communicative competence not only linked to the language of football, but also to daily communication.



Fig. 10 Examples of language activities in classroom.

The figure 11 illustrates one of the language games developed during activities on the pitch. The purpose of all activities on the pitch were to develop both the four language skills and the technical-football skills so that the players could learn language without giving up their passion for football. Here, we illustrate the activity entitled *Le parole in gioco* ['The words at stake']. The goal of this language game is to compose words related to a specific lexical field. For example, in the game's illustrative cartoons (see fig. 11) the players are working on the parts of the body. The language objectives of the game are the development of oral reception and written production. With reference to the technical objectives, conditional motor capacities such as speed of movements are developed.

We briefly illustrate the description of the game: teams of three or four players are made up. Several balls are positioned at a certain (variable) distance from the players. On each ball there is a letter of the alphabet. Players must compose the word indicated by the coach as quickly as possible. At the signal of the latter, the team concert by reflecting on how to spell the word and then send turns to a player, who can take only one ball, that is, a letter, to compose the requested word. Like any game, there are several variations. For example, the balls can be taken with the hands or controlled with the feet up to the point where the team is positioned. The playful dynamics of this game is based on competition. The team that correctly writes the required words in the shortest possible time wins. However, within this competition, the weaknesses of some are complemented by the strengths of the others.



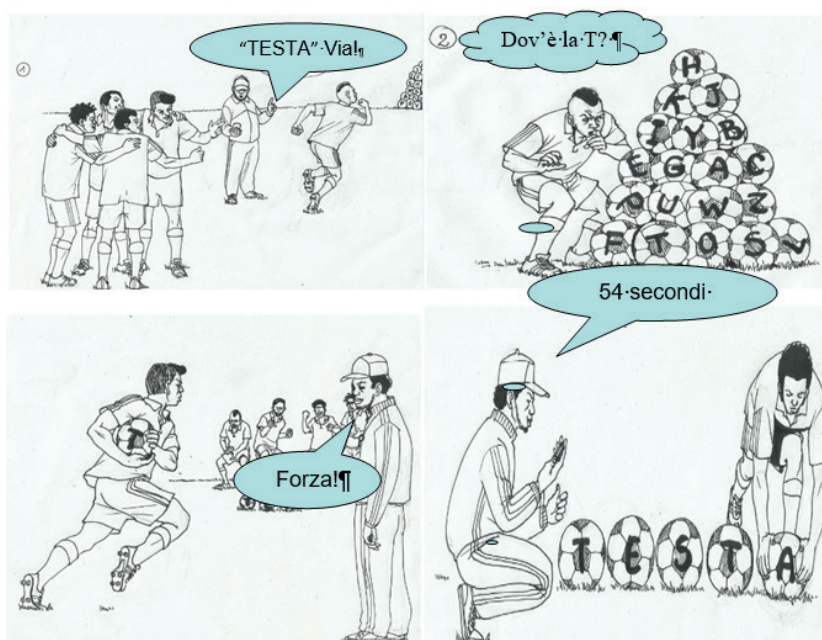


Fig. 11 Illustration of *Le parole in gioco* ['The words at stake'].

Referring to the management strategies of the class with differentiated abilities, Caon (2017: 22) notes that it is necessary to make students work on a wide range of different learning activities so that they can improve with respect to weaknesses, consolidate their points of strength and make their particular skills available to the class or their classmates. In this perspective, the enhancement of multiple language skills in the team as well as the variety of individual profiles have contributed to the improvement and expansion of learners' language skills. One of the student-players at the end of the project looks at it:

My passion is football. After finding a team, I had another difficulty. I could not speak to referees, my coach, my teammates and even my roommates. I did not understand what they said and they did not understand what I said. It is very difficult to live in a country if you do not understand the language. The Italian language course combined with football activities was very important to improve my Italian, to communicate with Italians and to improve the way I play football.

Our experimentation shows that teaching Italian through football implies two fundamental characteristics: the spaces where language teaching communication takes place (classroom, stadium, multimedia tools) and the areas to which didactic communication refers (language and motor activities). In the wake of this dynamic process, the language learning / teaching model of the research is a threefold nature based on the BRICK model, which stands for BRICK - KICK - CLICK. Our study has shown that both professional and younger players need to be triple motivated to study languages.

- The BRICK learning, although focusing on traditional tools such as classroom and textbooks, will consider the challenges related to language teaching strategies to football players, such as the duration of courses and the need to learn the language quickly, in the shortest period and without getting bored;
- The KICK learning refers to language learning activities during training, creating a symbiosis between language learning and football. This dimension allows to learn languages in a relaxing atmosphere, having fun and without feeling the “weight” of studying. The playful language learning activities will be designed to develop both language and technical/tactical skills (based for instance to *Total Physical Response* approach, that is the integration between language and movement through the development of playful activities);
- The CLICK learning, that is through digital tools, aims to empower players, given that the activities related to this dimension will also take place through autonomous learning. Both young players, the so called “digital natives”, and professional players, who often use video games during their leisure, will be probably more attracted by a language training course based on football and associated with digital tools.

## 10. CONCLUSION

The language teaching and sociolinguistic research related to the Multisport project, which we have illustrated in this contribution, show that football teams, like all the other sports on which the project has focused attention, are plurilingual contexts considered as asset for teams, athletes and also for today’s society, called to compete with plurilingualism. However, plurilingualism can also be a source of misunderstanding that must be managed through the process of linguistic and cultural mediation. If the contribution affirms the importance of football in sociolinguistic studies and the need to deepen research in this direction, it also notes the importance of deepening studies related on language issues in football.

With specific reference to teaching, those who teach Italian through football must offer the courses provided to meet the specific and often unusual needs of their learners. It is no coincidence that De Mauro (1981) recalls that:

Traditional school taught how one thing should be said. The democratic school will teach how one can say one thing, in what fantastic infinite universe of distinct ways of communicating we are projected when we must solve the problem of saying something. We can say something by drawing, singing, miming it, reciting, winking, pointing, and with words; we can say it in English, in Chinese, in Turkish, in French, in Greek, in Piedmontese, in Sicilian, in Viterbo language, Romanesque, Trasteverine, and in Italian [...] we can say it silently, as long as we really want to say it and as long as they let us say it (De Mauro 1981: 136).

If the research conducted in these ten years has allowed to delineate the areas of investigation of the language and football binomial both from a sociolinguistic and



language education point of view, further research will be oriented towards language learning tools as well as discourse analysis in football contexts (focusing on fans, players, trainers and journalists). The idea is also to use plurilingualism in football teams as an asset to give the opportunity to pupils and students to learn languages while having fun. About this, a case of good practice is certainly that of the Arsenal team. Through its *Arsenal Double Club* project, which for fifteen years since its establishment has already encouraged thousands of students and hundreds of schools to learn number of languages. Through this project, *Arsenal Double Club* uses football as a way to motivate primary and secondary school pupils to learn French, German, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese. If the *European rewarding challenge* document (European Commission 2008) launched ten years ago to encourage European citizens to know at least three languages is still far from being achieved, using football and other favorite sports can be a tool to increase the degree of plurilingualism in Europe.

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