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COMMUNICATING ACROSS LANGUAGES AND CULTURES IN MODERN FOOTBALL: A CASE STUDY

1. INTRODUCTION

The past few years have seen a steady increase in the mobility of football professionals, who increasingly spend a significant part of their careers abroad. Baines (2013) refers to them as *elite migrant players*, while Poli *et al.* (2018a: 1) propose the notion of *football expatriates*, i.e. «players having grown up outside the national association of their employer club and having moved abroad for sporting reasons». One of the consequences of this mobility is a growing need for language support. However, although the trend affects large numbers of football professionals, comparatively little is known about how linguistic and cultural barriers are bridged.

After a brief overview of the available literature (§2), this paper reports on a case study carried out at the Italian Federal Coaching Centre in Coverciano (Florence), which investigated trainee coaches' experiences and perceptions of “the language gap”. Our methodology and data collection methods are described in §3, while our results are presented in §4. Finally, our conclusions and suggestions for future research are presented in §5.

2. MOBILITY IN MODERN FOOTBALL AND “THE LANGUAGE GAP” ISSUE

Recent data on the mobility of professional footballers tell us that, worldwide, 21.2% of them are expatriates and that their proportion is even higher in UEFA associations, with 24.9% (i.e. one fourth) of all the players in Europe (Poli *et al.* 2018a). This figure is more than double in the Italian *Serie A* (56.5%) and reaches a whopping 62.7% in the English Premier League (Poli *et al.* 2018b). No official data are available regarding coaches, but their mobility has increased noticeably in recent years. Once again, the trend is especially marked in the English Premier League, where 14 out of 20 coaches in the 2018-2019 football season were non native speakers of English.

Undoubtedly, football professionals require some kind of language assistance, at least in the early stages of their stay abroad. Sandrelli (2015: 89) points out that professional players and coaches have both internal and external communication needs:

The former refers to communication within a football club (i.e. not meant for public scrutiny), among team members, coaches and other members of staff, during training sessions, in dressing-rooms, the gym, etc. The latter refers to communication in the public sphere, i.e. not only verbal exchanges during games [...] but also football-related media events before and after games, such as press conferences and interviews.

Baines (2018) adds that language assistance may also be required in medicals, club community work, contract negotiations and a range of situations affecting footballers' private and family life (housing, healthcare, banking, and so on). Siebetcheu (2016: 149) observes that players encounter several language-related problems when they start operating in a foreign working environment: clearly, such difficulties (and the players' ability to overcome them) also depend on their background, education and life experiences.

Until now, neither the football governing bodies (FIFA and its member confederations) nor the world players' union (FIFPro) has produced any guidelines on language support for migrant players and coaches. To date, the most comprehensive studies investigating this issue has been produced by the Innsbruck Football Research Group, thanks to data collected from field observation and in-depth interviews with football professionals (players, coaches and referees) in a number of European countries (Chovanec / Podhorna-Policka 2009; Giera *et al.* 2008; Lavric / Steiner 2012, 2017). Generally speaking, when a foreign coach or player joins a club, their goal is to be able to communicate in the foreign language as efficiently and quickly as possible; referees also need to develop language skills in order to work efficiently, especially during international competitions. Giera *et al.* (2008) rightly point out that, in order to fit into a multilingual working environment, football professionals may require a range of short-term and medium- to long-term strategies. While language

classes are the obvious solution, it must be taken into account that learning a new language takes time and requires considerable commitment: indeed, Lavric / Steiner (2012) highlight that in many cases lack of motivation can be an issue, as well as the lack of relevant language materials specifically developed for football professionals. The short-term strategies adopted by clubs may vary widely in different settings, ranging from no language support at all to various types of ad hoc solutions. Lavric / Steiner (2012) found a number of big clubs, such as Bayern München and Bayer 04 Leverkusen, where a personal interpreter (not necessarily a professional one) is assigned to new signings; some clubs allocate a *factotum* (usually a former player) to the new arrival; in other cases, a team mate with the same language background is required to act as a linguistic mediator. The use of a team mate as a mediator seems to be the most common solution, because it is cheap and easy and also ensures that the new player is supported by someone who is familiar with club culture and rules, as well as with the culture of the host country. Clubs are often reluctant to hire professional freelance interpreters, both for economic reasons and because they are external figures, i.e. they are not part of the “club family”. Ringbom (2012) reports on another solution adopted by a multilingual team competing in the Finnish league (IFK Mariehamn in the Åland Islands between Sweden and Finland), i.e. the use of a lingua franca, namely Swedish in training sessions and English off the field, while Finnish was hardly ever used at all. Losa (2013) focuses on coaches, rather than players, and explores the role played by code-switching in coaching a multilingual team such as the Swiss national youth team.

When dealing with the media, the presence of professional interpreters is more widely accepted, as clubs are aware of the role played by translation in conveying the public face of a foreign player or coach. However, the lack of best practice guidelines on how to work with interpreters in this setting may affect how such public events are organised, as there is huge variability even in basic aspects such as the primary parties’ understanding of the interpreter’s role, the interpreter’s seating position, and the choice of interpreting mode (consecutive, whispered and/or simultaneous interpreting) (Sandrelli 2015). In addition, Baines (2013, 2018) has shown that interpreting may become the perfect arena for power struggles between club media officers, players’ agents and players themselves, when they have conflicting agendas.

This brief overview has shown that modern football teams offer very interesting scenarios of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic contact, and that more research is needed on how communication difficulties are tackled and on the role that professional interpreters can play in such environments. What follows is a small contribution in that direction.

3. CASE STUDY: METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The case study presented below can be considered a pilot for a wider international

project on language support for migrant players and coaches, currently being developed with two colleagues in the UK (Prof. Roger Baines, University of East Anglia) and Spain (Dr. Pedro Castillo, University of Granada).

The study took place in the Italian FA Coaching Centre between July and September 2018, and involved 10 former players attending coaching courses there. Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data, while in-depth interviews yielded qualitative data. The study was carried out with the help of an MA student who graduated in Interpreting and Translation at UNINT in spring 2019 with a dissertation on football interpreting (Giudici 2017-2018).

3.1 The subjects

The 10 subjects were all former top-level football players; 7 of them had recently concluded their playing career and were between 35 and 44 years of age; the remaining 3 were slightly older, 45-54. Half of the subjects were non native speakers of Italian, but as they had spent a large part of their careers in Italy, they had elected to attend the coaching course in Florence. The course prepared them for the UEFA A licence, which enables coaches to work with youth teams, reserve teams of top-flight clubs, and teams in second-tier leagues anywhere in Europe.

9 subjects out of 10 had a secondary-school certificate, while one had left school after completing compulsory education. All of them had had distinguished careers and the majority had also played for their national teams. In addition, all of the subjects had played in more than one country (Australia, Brazil, China, France, Italy, Qatar, Spain, Ukraine and the US): therefore, the sample, albeit small, can be considered fairly representative of current trends in modern football. 90% of the subjects had picked up some knowledge of a foreign language during their time abroad, depending on where they had played (English or Spanish, in the case of the Italian native speakers; Italian, French or English, for the others); some of them had also studied foreign languages at school or through language courses. However, their self-reported competence (in any of the foreign languages they mentioned) was relatively low, with 40% indicating a B2 level (upper intermediate), 20% a B1 (lower intermediate) and 10% an A2 (beginner); only one subject stated that his level was a C2 (very proficient user).¹

3.2 The questionnaire

The questionnaire was devised after consulting the available literature and in particular the papers by the Innsbruck Football Group (see §2); other sources that were consulted included a similar survey carried out in professional volleyball by

¹ Here reference is made to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. See <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>.

another UNINT graduate (Sabbatini 2014-2015).

The questionnaire was distributed to the 10 subjects in a paper format at the end of one of their classes in July 2018: they were given about 30 minutes to complete it. The introduction to the questionnaire informed participants that the study was aimed at investigating football interpreting and that it was part of a wider project involving a British and a Spanish university. No other information about the aims of the research was given at this stage, to avoid influencing their answers.

The survey was made up of 3 sections and a total of 27 questions (some of which included sub-questions), with a mixture of yes/no, multiple-choice and open questions. Section 1 was focused on the participants' biographical information, including age, nationality, education and language background. This was followed by questions on their career, coach education and coaching experience (if any). Section 2 investigated the subjects' personal experiences of the language gap, not only when playing abroad but also in their home leagues, because today «one may operate within a multilingual working environment even without leaving one's country» (Chovanec / Podhorna-Policka 2009: 186). A group of questions focused on the importance of the language gap for modern coaches and on how the subjects intend to deal with it in their new profession. Finally, section 3 focused on football interpreters, in an attempt to discover what these student coaches knew about football interpreters and to clarify their expectations of this professional figure.

3.3 The interviews

At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked whether they would be willing to grant a short interview on the same topics. 8 of them agreed to do so, but for practical reasons it was only possible to proceed with 4 of them on the day of their final exams. Thus, the interviews were carried out in September 2018 at the Federal Coaching Centre.

A short briefing was given to subjects to remind them of the aim of the study, as a couple of months had passed since the survey. They were also assured that confidentiality was guaranteed and any sensitive data would be removed from any publication. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on the subjects' experiences and communication needs. All the interviews were recorded for research purposes (using the open-source software programme *Audacity*) after obtaining written permission from the subjects.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Questionnaire results

The biographical data collected in Section 1 of the questionnaire have already been reported in §3.1. This section reports on the rest of the questionnaire, which included the questions on the language gap issue (Section 2) and on the role of football

interpreters (Section 3). As it is not possible to describe all the findings in detail here, only the most relevant ones are illustrated below.

The first question in Section 2 asked how the language barrier was bridged in situations in which one or more players did not know the shared language. Subjects could choose multiple answers (as many as they wished) from a list of 8 options (see figure 1). The two most frequent answers (selected by 5 subjects each) were the gradual learning of the foreign language by the player(s) in question, followed by the use of another player with foreign language skills as a mediator. Only one participant selected “translation by an interpreter provided by the club”.

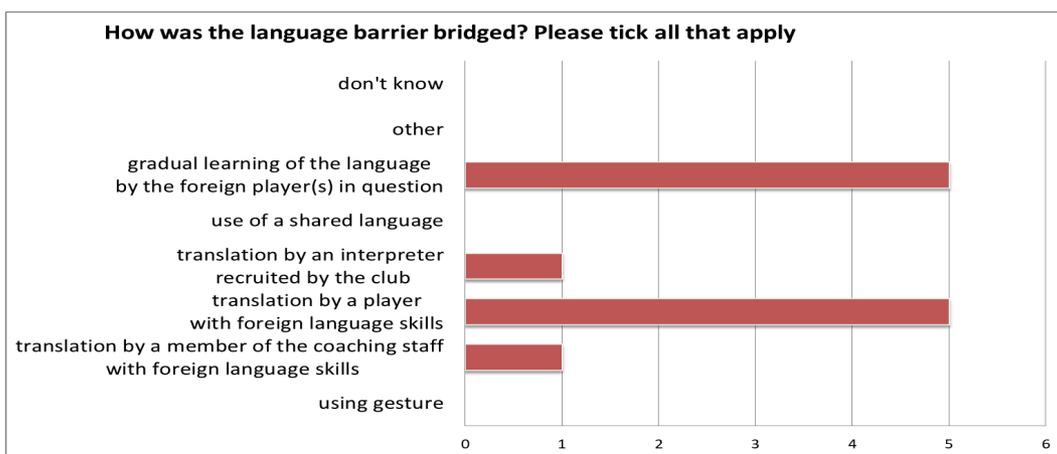


Fig. 1 Solutions to the language barrier in multilingual football teams.

In their opinion, the language barrier was more deeply felt during pre- and post-match meetings for tactical explanations (8 subjects) and during the match (4); 3 subjects also indicated the half-time break and medical examinations or treatment sessions, thus hinting that communication barriers may exist not only between players and coaches, but also with other members of staff (see figure 2).

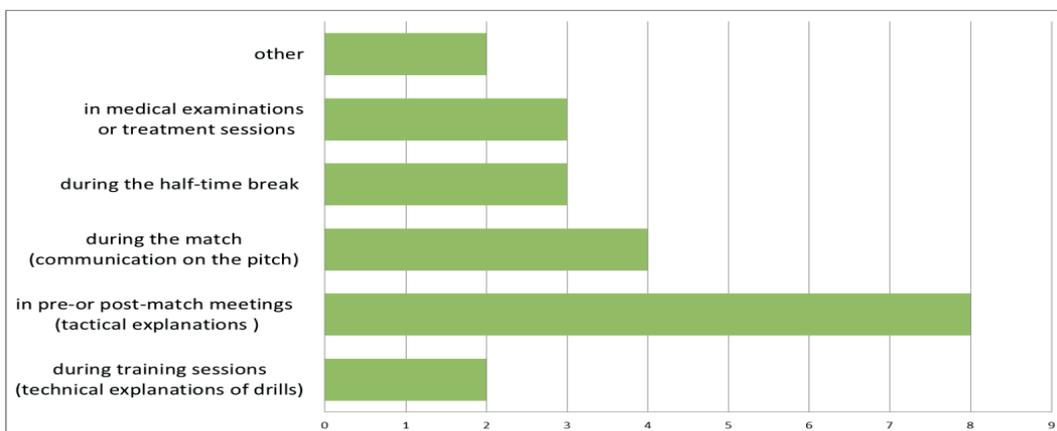


Fig. 2 When is the language gap is more deeply felt?

These results were confirmed by the answers to the following question, which focused on the main problems for players who do not know the language very well. The top answer was “difficulties in interactions with fellow players” (9 subjects), followed closely by “difficulties in interactions with the coach and members of his staff” and “daily life difficulties” (7); interaction with the media and club officials also featured prominently, with 6 answers each (see figure 3).

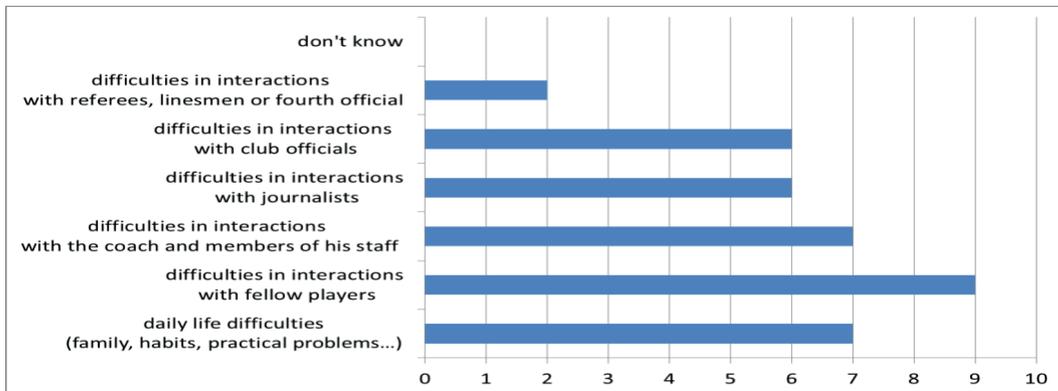


Fig. 3 *What are the main problems for a player who does not know the language very well?*

The same questions were asked with a focus on coaches rather than players. According to our subjects, communication skills are even more essential for the modern coach than for players. Predictably, a coach who does not speak the language of the team may experience problems in interacting with his players (chosen by all 10 participants), but interaction with club officials was also singled out by almost everyone (9 answers); interaction with the media followed closely (8 answers). Interaction with staff members was also mentioned (7 answers), as well as daily life difficulties (7 answers). In short, it would seem that modern coaches require all-round language skills to be able to operate efficiently in training sessions and matches, in meetings with club officials, in the press room, and so on.

After establishing that language barriers do exist and are deeply felt, the next step was to try and find out what solutions are in place to bridge those gaps. In the experience of our subjects, clubs tend to provide language teachers to players, especially in the first few weeks, to speed up their adaptation process (60% of participants answered “always” and 40% “sometimes”); however, while 60% indicated that this was the case for coaches too, 30% said they did not know and 10% answered “no, never”. The opposite was true of interpreters, with 90% of the subjects stating that, to their knowledge, foreign coaches were always assigned an interpreter by the club vs. 50% of players (and 40% “sometimes”). Thus, at least in the experience of this small sample of subjects, in the leagues where they had played (see §3.1) clubs seemed more prepared to hire an interpreter for coaches than for players.

As all the participants were aspiring coaches, it seemed interesting to ask them what they would do, should they ever get a coaching job abroad without the necessary

language skills. The most frequent answer was that they would look for a language teacher (9, as opposed to only 3 who would expect the club to provide one) or have someone in their staff who spoke the foreign language in question (6 answers). Only 3 subjects would look for an interpreter and only 2 would ask the club to find one.

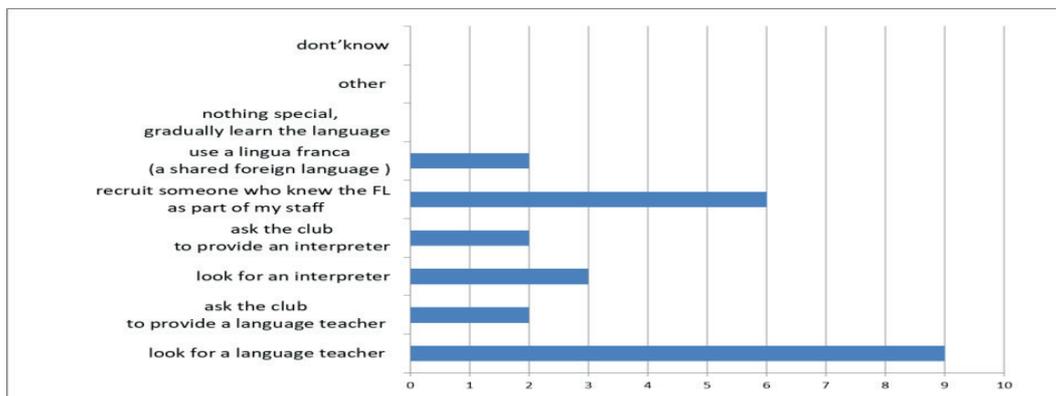


Fig. 4 *If you were to coach a team abroad and your language skills were insufficient, what would you do?*

However, when communication with the media was mentioned, the picture changed. All the subjects were of the opinion that today the latter aspect is very important in football, since being able to express one’s messages clearly, avoiding misunderstandings and keeping fans happy are all part of the job. The answers to the question “in your experience, when is an interpreter required in football?” seem to indicate that our participants are aware of both the external and internal dimensions of communication: 100% of our subjects chose “press conferences” and 6 chose “interviews” (as such public events pose dangers to someone with a less than perfect command of the foreign language), but training sessions and (interestingly) contract negotiations were also chosen by 6 people.

It seemed fitting to dedicate the last section of the questionnaire to interpreters in football. Despite the fact that none of the participants knew the difference between “interpreter” and “translator” or between “consecutive” and “simultaneous” interpreting, they had very clear expectations in relation to their professional competences (figure 5): knowledge of the two languages came top (9 answers), followed by knowledge of the two cultures and knowledge of football (7) and by confidentiality and professional secrecy (5).

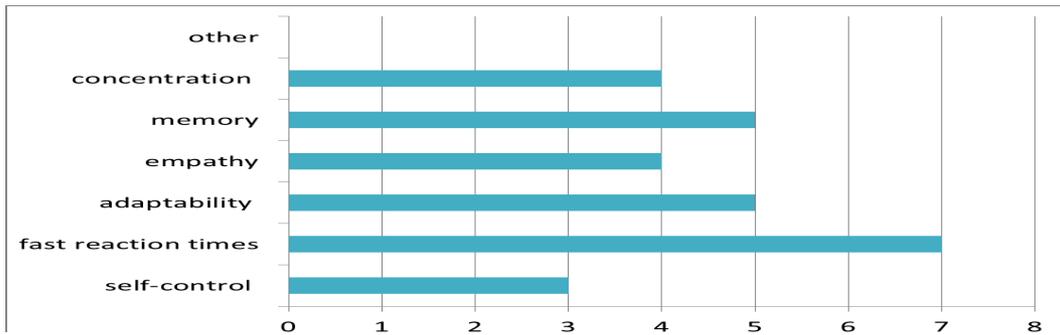


Fig. 5 *What are the key professional competences of a football interpreter?*

In addition, the subjects seemed aware of the cognitive difficulties involved in interpreting, as is shown by their answers to the question on the key personal traits of a football interpreter (figure 6). Fast reaction times (7 answers) and memory and adaptability (5 each) were the most frequently selected answers.

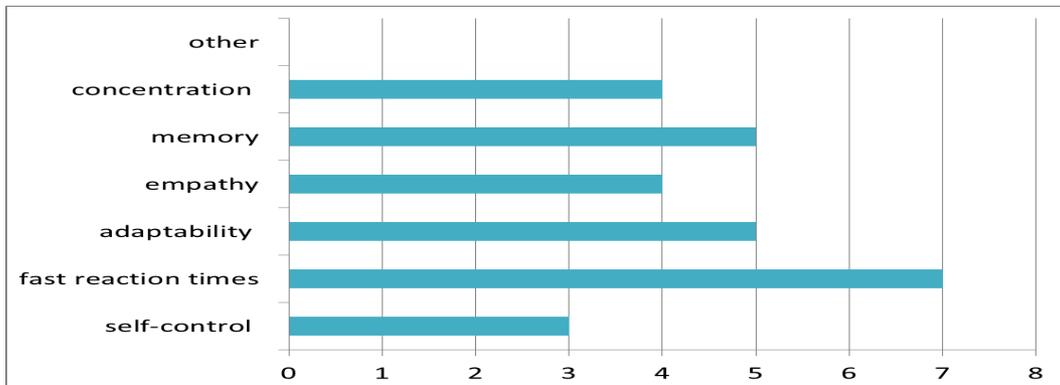


Fig. 6 *What are the key personal traits of a football interpreter?*

Finally, it is worth pointing out that after completing the questionnaire, many subjects had questions and were keen to find out more about interpreting. More specifically, they wanted to clarify the difference between “interpreter” and “translator” and between “consecutive” and “simultaneous” interpreting, so that they would know the correct terminology to request for interpreting services in the future. Some of them also asked about the training and qualifications you need to become an interpreter and about the existence of professional associations; their aim was to be aware of current educational and professional standards in interpreting, in order to be able to select the most suitable person for the job, should they need a personal interpreter in their future coaching careers. This ten-minute discussion was an unexpected but welcome outcome of the first stage of the study.

4.2 Interview data

As was mentioned in §3.3, the interviews took place a couple of months after the survey and involved only 4 subjects on the day of their final exams at the Federal

Coaching Centre. Unfortunately, the other subjects who had agreed to take part were not available.

The 4 interviews were transcribed and carefully scrutinised to identify recurring themes and interesting aspects of the subjects' experiences with languages in professional football. Two of them were Italian native speakers who had also played abroad, while the other two were foreign nationals who had played in Italy and in other leagues. Table 1 summarises key information about the interviewees' backgrounds, interview duration and transcript length (number of words).

	Nationality	Leagues (player)	National team	Interview duration	Text length
A	Italian	Serie A MLS (US)	Youth/senior	6'	1,157
B	Brazilian	Brazilian Premier League Serie A Ukranian Premier League Liga (ES) NASL (US)	Youth team	16' 25"	3,118
C	Italian	Serie A Chinese Super League	Youth/senior	18'	3,653
D	Italian /Brazilian	Liga (ES) Serie A Ligue 1 (FRA)	Youth/senior	28' 23"	4,854

Tab. 1 *Basic interview data*

The interviews were semi-structured around a script, and each one took a slightly different course, as further questions were added or adapted on the spot, depending on the subjects' answers, available time and willingness to talk. This explains the different durations of the interviews: subject A could only grant us a few minutes, as he had a train to catch; subject B was initially more guarded, owing to his language difficulties in Italian; subjects C and D were the most open and talkative, and D was especially interested in the topic, given his multilingual background. A lot of very useful data was collected: what follows is a short summary of the most relevant findings.

Subject A was an Italian native speaker who played in one of the biggest *Serie A* clubs and ended his career playing in the US for a couple of years. In his Italian club foreign team mates were offered language classes after training sessions, while interpreters were only called in to help Turkish players, probably on account of the differences between Italian and Turkish. When he moved to the US, he requested the presence of an interpreter in press conferences and interviews in the first few months, as he was keen to avoid any possible misunderstandings. However, as he already knew

some English, he personally arranged for language classes at home a couple of times a week. He reported occasional comprehension difficulties on the pitch, but nothing too upsetting. Likewise, he did notice some cultural differences, but did not find it hard to socialise. The presence of his family (also attending language classes) was a plus in the process. All in all, he described the American experience as extremely positive.

Subject B had a completely different story to tell. He arrived in Italy from Brazil at the age of 20, on his own, with no knowledge of Italian and a very vague idea of where he was going to play: he was dismayed to discover he had been signed by a *Serie B* (second division) club rather than a *Serie A* one and the exact terms of his contract were not clear to him at the time, as it had not been translated to him. When he was first presented to the press, a former player translated his answers but did not really explain much of what was going on. The club did provide a language teacher, but subject B admitted candidly that he often skipped classes, preferring to pick up words from team mates in the dressing-room. This situation ultimately caused serious difficulties, as the player soon fell in with the “wrong” crowd in town and found himself in awkward situations. His shy nature and the language gap increased his isolation, and gradually led to alcohol abuse and the desire to quit. Then, he was offered a contract by a club in Eastern Europe, where he found a polyglot coach and a multilingual team with groups of several nationalities. English was the *lingua franca* of the dressing-room, but was not spoken by all, and communication problems sometimes resulted in friction. All in all, Subject B reported the most severe consequences of the language gap, and while some were probably related to his own personality as a young man, others were caused by insufficient linguistic and cultural support offered to him by the clubs for which he played.

Subject C was an Italian native speaker who had a very successful career in *Serie A* in Italy and then played in China for a season. While in Italy his foreign team mates usually had the support of a language teacher about 3-4 times a week (and only rarely an interpreter), in China he was assigned a personal interpreter to help him both at work and in his daily life. As the coach and his staff were actually Italian, he only experienced communication problems with his Chinese team mates who spoke no English. Although his English was basic, it was enough to get by on the pitch, and he intends to perfect it in the near future in order to be able to coach abroad. In China the language gap was most deeply felt in socialising, as conversations with his team mates were difficult, if not downright impossible. His experience in China has made him acutely aware of the importance of having a good, trustworthy interpreter: should he get a coaching job in a country where an “exotic” language is spoken (i.e. Chinese, Arabic or any other language he would not be able to learn in a few months), he intends to recruit an interpreter. This would either be a member of his technical staff with good foreign language skills or a professional interpreter who knows football well (the game itself, not just the terminology).

Finally, Subject D could be defined as a “serial polyglot”. He moved to Spain from Brazil when he was only 16 and picked up the language (and Catalan) from his housemates, as he tended to skip the language classes arranged by the club. When he moved to Italy, once again he taught himself the language and never used an interpreter, not even in interviews; he repeated the process when he moved to France in the latter part of his career. He is currently learning English, as he recognises its value as a coaching *lingua franca*. Should he get a coaching job in a country where the official language is unrelated to the languages he knows, he intends to recruit his own interpreter; indeed, he distrusts club-appointed interpreters, as he is convinced that they may not always translate everything accurately out of fear of losing their jobs, especially during tense moments of the football season. Finally, as Subject D has always brought the family with him in his moves, he highlighted that all clubs should offer support to players’ families, to prevent isolation and protect them from potential dangers (meeting “the wrong people”).

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study did not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of language support policies in modern football, but rather to try and identify some trends in a small set of data from a specific case study. Despite the small size of the sample, the varied backgrounds and experiences of the subjects make it representative of trends in today’s top-level football.

Our findings have confirmed the absence of a uniform approach to language support in football clubs. The most frequently quoted solution is language classes arranged by the clubs, which seem to accept the idea that interpreters are necessary only when the languages involved are very distant (e.g. Italian and Chinese) and language learning is necessarily a long-term process. Coaches, on the other hand, are more frequently offered an interpreter, because they need to be able to communicate on and off the pitch much more frequently and with a high level of sophistication; they need to be able to communicate with their players, club officials, referees and competitors, but also with their fans via the media (in interviews and press conferences).

The data collected in our study (and especially in the interviews) have highlighted some problems. Firstly, although language classes are often arranged by clubs, attendance is not compulsory. Lack of motivation can be a problem in young players who move to a new country; depending on their personality, some may rely more on informal language learning in the dressing-room, and some may tend to withdraw within themselves. As Heinz Peischl, a multilingual Austrian coach, explained in his interview to Lavric / Steiner (2012: 19), clubs tend to see foreign players as a commodity that must “function” in the new environment immediately; they do not seem to realise that performance is closely related to their well-being. In addition, it must be noted that the language support policies in place in most clubs

are aimed exclusively at the players themselves; when their families relocate to the new country with them, isolation and adaptation problems may potentially affect everyone and become a further source of stress for football professionals. Moreover, the importance of individual personality has also emerged in the interviews, with some subjects experiencing fewer adaptation problems not so much as a result of the support they received, but thanks to their own flexibility.

The cultural aspects of adaptation are as important as the linguistic ones; yet, the clubs analysed in our data seem to interpret this simply as adaptation to club culture (rather than to a wider notion of culture of the host country) and to rely on other players of the same language background to transmit this. Finally, it is worth pointing out that all of the above also applies to coaches and affects them even more than players, as their job requires more wide-ranging and advanced communication skills.

Today, professional football clubs invest heavily in foreign players and coaches. However, there seems to be ample margin of improvement in terms of how such professionals (and their families) can be helped to settle in new environments. A more structured and coherent approach may also contribute to performance, thus protecting club investments. Thus, there may be scope for a new professional figure in addition to the existing ones (see §2), that of “language support manager”, whose task would be to identify the best solution for each new arrival, depending on their backgrounds, language skills, and personal circumstances. For example, language classes may be arranged on club premises, at home, or in a language school, as individual classes or in groups, with or without family members; when professional interpreters are needed, it might be for a few weeks or for a prolonged period of time, and only in public (media) events or in footballing activities as well, and so on. More research is needed on current practices and needs of multilingual football teams, in order to come up with best practice guidelines to language support for clubs, players and coaches.

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