

SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF FOOTBALL TERMINOLOGY : EXPLORING MEANING AND CONTEXT IN MATCH REPORTS

Jonathan Halomoan Sinaga¹, Bernieke Anggita Ristia Damanik²

Department of English Education, University of HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar

jonthanhalomoan@gmail.com¹, bernieke.damanik@uhn.ac.id²

Abstract

This study investigates the semantic characteristics of football terminology as it appears in English-language match reports. By employing a qualitative-descriptive approach, the research analyses how specific football terms convey meaning within various contextual frameworks, including tactical descriptions, player actions, and evaluative commentary. The analysis identifies key semantic fields, explores the use of metaphor and metonymy, and examines the role of collocations and register in shaping the interpretation of football events. Findings reveal that football match reports utilise dynamic and context-sensitive vocabulary, where terms often acquire nuanced meanings depending on situational factors and discourse goals. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how language constructs and communicates the complex realities of football matches, offering insights relevant to sports linguistics, journalism, and applied semantics.

Keywords : Football, football linguistics, match reports, discourse analysis, contextual meaning, ambiguity, polysemy

INTRODUCTION

A. Background

Football, being one of the world's most popular sports, has been the topic of substantial academic research in various fields, including economics, linguistics, management, and education. Professional football's evolution into a multibillion-dollar corporation has piqued the interest of regulators, investors, and scholars alike, resulting in a considerable increase in study output since the late twentieth century. Recent literature reviews have attempted to systematise this growing body of study, with a particular emphasis on risk management, financial performance, and football clubs' economic structures. These findings indicate the need for additional research into both internal (e.g., operational leverage) and external (e.g., business climate) risk drivers and their impact on club performance volatility.

From a linguistic perspective, football is recognised for its rich and specialised terminology, which forms a distinct jargon within the broader domain of sports language. Terms like "goal", "corner", "offside", and "foul" are not only essential for understanding the game but also for effective communication among players, coaches, commentators, and fans. Recent projects have focused on compiling digital football dictionaries and ontologies, enabling more precise semantic analysis and supporting applications in natural language processing. The extraction and classification of football terms often rely on corpus-based approaches, comparing frequency and specificity against general language corpora to identify domain-specific vocabulary.

Studies in football discourse have also examined the rhetorical and metaphorical language used in match reports and commentaries. Cognitive linguistic approaches, such as frame semantics and conceptual metaphor theory, have revealed that football is often conceptualised through metaphors like "Football is War" or "Football is Art", reflecting the sport's dynamic and competitive nature. Comparative analyses of American and British football match reports show differences in pragmatic and stylistic choices, with British reports tending toward implicitness and creativity, while American reports favour explicitness and clarity.

On the educational front, literature reviews have explored football learning strategies, particularly in the context of student development. These studies emphasise the importance of physical, technical, and tactical assessments to evaluate player abilities, such as endurance, speed, agility, passing, and shooting. Reliable and valid assessment tools are highlighted as crucial for player development and team success.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that football is not only a sport but a complex social, economic, and linguistic phenomenon. Key research trends include the systematisation of football terminology, the analysis of discourse and metaphor, the assessment of player abilities, and the investigation of risk and performance management within clubs. Despite the breadth of existing research, gaps remain—especially regarding the integration of linguistic analysis with computational tools and the exploration of football language across different cultures and media.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

A. Linguistic Landscape and Identity

EnikőBiró (2023) explored the linguistic landscape of football in a Hungarian minority context in Romania, demonstrating how language use in and around stadiums indexes collective identity and facilitates processes of reterritorialisation. Biró's study reveals that football spaces are not just sites of sporting activity but also arenas for negotiating ethnic and linguistic identities through banners, chants, and signage.

B. Semantic and Lexicographic Approaches

Eva Lavric et al. (2008) edited a foundational volume, *The Linguistics of Football*, which brings together research on football terminology, idioms, and metaphor. Schmidt's contribution in this volume presents the "Kicktionary", a multilingual electronic resource that applies corpus linguistics and frame semantics to map relationships between football lexical units. The volume also discusses the prevalence of English loanwords and the challenges of distinguishing general language from specialised football terms across languages.

C. Discourse Analysis and National Identity

Mariza Georgalou (2004) applied critical discourse analysis to Greek football commentary during Euro 2004, focusing on how sportscasters construct national identity. Using the discourse-historical approach (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), Georgalou found that commentators employ language strategically to foster unity and solidarity, reinforcing the ideological power of football media in shaping collective identities.

D. Metaphor

Studies by Henrik Nordin, Stephan Vierkant, and others (in Lavric et al., 2008) have examined the use of conceptual metaphors (e.g., "Football is War") and idiomatic expressions in football reporting and live commentary. These metaphors structure how fans and commentators conceptualise the game, influencing both language and perception.

E. Contextual Meaning

Contextual meaning refers to how the meaning of a word or lexeme is shaped and determined by the specific situation or environment in which it is used. It emphasises that a

word's meaning is not fixed or absolute but varies depending on the linguistic and situational context surrounding it.

From a semantic perspective, contextual meaning involves the influence of surrounding words or information on how a particular word or phrase is understood (Science Direct Topics). It goes beyond the literal or dictionary meaning to include pragmatic aspects such as speaker intention and conversational circumstances (Fiveable, 2023).

F. Ambiguity

Ambiguity occurs when a word, phrase, or sentence has two or more distinct meanings, and the intended meaning is unclear without additional context. Ambiguity can be lexical (word-level) or structural (sentence-level). For example, the word “bank” can mean a financial institution or the side of a river, and without context, the meaning remains ambiguous.

According to Cruse (2000), ambiguity arises when a linguistic expression can be interpreted in multiple ways, and the listener or reader must rely on context or extra-linguistic knowledge to resolve the uncertainty.

G. Polysemy

Polysemy refers to a single word having multiple related meanings that share a common semantic core. Unlike ambiguity, where meanings are unrelated, polysemous meanings are connected by extension or metaphorical usage. For example, “foot” can mean the lower part of the leg or a unit of measurement, both related by the concept of length or base.

Lyons (1995) defines polysemy as the phenomenon where one lexical item has several related senses, which are cognitively linked and often evolve historically from a primary meaning.

METHOD OF RESEARCH

A. Research Approaches

This study adopts a qualitative-descriptive approach combined with computational linguistic methods to explore and analyse the meanings and contextual uses of football

terminology in match reports. The qualitative aspect focuses on in-depth interpretation of language use, while computational tools facilitate systematic processing of large text corpora.

B. Research Questions

1. What are the most commonly used football-specific terms in match reports, and how are they semantically grouped?
2. How do the meanings of major football terminology change depending on their context in match reports?
3. How do modifiers (such as adjectives and adverbs) affect the interpretation of football terminology in match narratives?
4. How are complicated football events (such as goal scoring, fouling, and substitutions) depicted and reported in match reports?
5. How consistent is the use of football terminology among sources, leagues, and reporting styles?
6. What difficulties occur in disambiguating football words with multiple meanings or applications in match reports?

C. Research Objectives

1. To identify and prepare a thorough list of football-related phrases typically used in match reports.
2. To examine the semantic categories and meanings of football terminology in the context of match reports.
3. To investigate how contextual circumstances affect the interpretation of football words in match narratives.
4. To investigate how modifiers and syntactic structures influence the meaning of football terminology.
5. To create semantic representations of complex football events like goals, fouls, and substitutes, as described in match reports.
6. To solve issues of ambiguity and polysemy in football terminology inside match reports.

D. The Techniques of Data Analysis

Based on the available information, these are a suitable technique of data analysis for the study.

1. Text Preprocessing

The collected match reports are first cleaned by removing irrelevant symbols, correcting errors, and standardising syntactic structures. This includes deleting auxiliary verbs, prepositions, and conjunctions that do not contribute to semantic meaning, as well as resolving anaphoric references (e.g., pronouns) to their antecedents. This step prepares the text for semantic parsing.

2. Syntactic Parsing

Use a syntactic parser (e.g., ETAP-3 parser) to generate a normalised syntactic structure (Norm-SynS) that represents the grammatical relations in the text. This structure serves as the input for semantic analysis.

3. Semantic Structure Construction

- 1) Basic Semantic Structure (BSemS): Interpret the normalised syntactic structure in terms of ontological elements such as events, agents, and objects relevant to football.
- 2) Enhanced Semantic Structure (EnSemS): Extend BSemS by applying inference rules to extract implicit information and enrich the semantic representation of the text.

4. Lexical-Semantic Analysis

Extract football-specific lexical units and categorise them using linguistic theories such as semantic field theory and prototype theory. This involves grouping terms into semantic domains (e.g., scoring, fouls, player roles) and analysing their meanings and relationships.

5. Ontology Mapping and Semantic Relations

Map the extracted terms and events onto a football ontology that formally represents concepts and their relations (e.g., GoalEvent, PlayerRole). This facilitates consistent semantic interpretation and enables reasoning over the data.

6. Inference and Knowledge Extraction

Apply logical inference rules (e.g., using the Etalog formalism) to derive implicit

knowledge from the explicit semantic structures, such as inferring consequences of events or player roles not directly stated in the text.

7. Evaluation and Validation

Evaluate the semantic analysis by comparing the results with expert annotations or by testing the system on unseen match reports to assess accuracy in identifying events, roles, and contextual meanings.

DATA ANALYSIS, FINDINGS, AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study involves a systematic process combining linguistic and computational techniques to explore the meaning and context of football terminology in match reports.

1. Text Preprocessing

The collected match reports are first cleaned by removing irrelevant symbols, correcting typographical errors, and normalising the text. Tokenisation is performed to split the text into words and phrases, preparing it for further analysis.

2. Syntactic Parsing

Using natural language processing (NLP) tools, the text is syntactically parsed to identify grammatical structures such as subjects, objects, verbs, and modifiers. This step helps in understanding how football terms function within sentences.

3. Lexical Extraction and Categorisation

Football-specific terms are extracted using domain-specific dictionaries and keyword extraction techniques. These terms are then categorised into semantic fields such as player roles, actions, events, and locations based on linguistic theories like semantic field theory and prototype theory.

4. Contextual Semantic Analysis

Each term is analysed within its sentence and broader discourse context to resolve ambiguities and polysemous meanings. Semantic role labelling is applied to identify the roles of entities involved in football events (e.g., who scored, who assisted).

5. Semantic Representation and Ontology Mapping

The extracted terms and events are mapped onto a football ontology that formally represents concepts and relationships (e.g., GoalEvent, PlayerRole). This structured

representation facilitates consistent interpretation and supports reasoning about the events described.

6. Inference and Knowledge Extraction

Logical inference rules are applied to the semantic representations to derive implicit information, such as the impact of a goal on the match outcome or player contributions not explicitly stated.

7. Evaluation

The accuracy and reliability of the semantic analysis are evaluated by comparing the results against expert annotations or a gold standard dataset of match reports. Error analysis is conducted to identify and address challenges in parsing and interpretation.

This multi-layered analysis approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how football terminology conveys meaning within the dynamic context of match reports, capturing both explicit and implicit semantic information.

B. Findings

Table 1. Football Match Reports Analysis

Football Term	Example Commentator Conversation	Possible Meanings (Polysemy/Ambiguity)	Contextual Interpretation
Goal	"What a fantastic goal by the striker!"	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The event of scoring a point in the match. 2. The physical structure (goalposts/net) where the ball must enter to score. 	Here, "goal" refers to the scoring event, not the physical goal structure.
Kick	"He takes the free kick carefully."	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The act of striking the ball with the foot. 2. A specific type of set-piece in football (free kick). 	"Kick" here refers to a set-piece event, not just any random strike of the ball.
Offside	"The assistant referee raised the flag for	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A rule violation where a player is in an illegal 	Both meanings relate, but the term

	offside."	position. 2. Being physically positioned beyond the last defender.	here implies the rule infringement causing a stoppage.
Pass	"The midfielder's pass was perfectly timed."	1. The act of sending the ball to a teammate. 2. To succeed or move beyond something (e.g., "pass the defender").	The term refers to the act of sending the ball, but timing also implies strategic success.
Header	"He scored a header from the corner kick."	1. Striking the ball with the head. 2. The title or heading of a document (non-football meaning).	Clearly refers to the action of using the head to direct the ball during the match.
Cross	"The winger delivered a dangerous cross into the box."	1. A type of pass from the wide area into the penalty box. 2. To go across or intersect something.	In football, "cross" means a specific passing technique aimed at creating a scoring chance.
Shot	"That was a powerful shot on target."	1. An attempt to score by striking the ball. 2. A photograph or moment capture.	Refers to an attempt to score a goal by kicking the ball.
Mark	"The defender is marking the striker closely."	1. To closely guard an opponent. 2. A physical or written sign or grade.	Here, "marking" is a defensive action to prevent the opponent from receiving the ball.
Corner	"The team won a corner after the defender	1. A set-piece awarded when the ball crosses	Refers to the set-piece situation, not a

	cleared the ball."	the goal line last touched by a defender. 2. A physical angle or bend.	geometric angle.
Play	"He played a brilliant ball through the defense."	1. To engage in the sport. 2. A specific action or move during the game. 3. To performact.	In this context, "play" refers to a specific tactical move or pass.

C. Discussions

Football commentary frequently employs terms that have multiple meanings or ambiguous interpretations depending on the context. Understanding these nuances is crucial for accurate semantic analysis of match reports and live commentaries.

1. Polysemy and Contextual Meaning

Many football terms are polysemous, meaning they carry several related meanings. For example, the word "**goal**" can refer both to the event of scoring and the physical structure of the goalposts. In the commentator's phrase, "What a fantastic goal by the striker!", the meaning clearly points to the scoring event rather than the physical goal structure. This shows how context disambiguates meaning.

2. Ambiguity Resolved by Context

Terms like "**kick**" and "**pass**" can have general meanings (e.g., any strike or movement) or specific football-related meanings (e.g., a free kick or a tactical pass). For instance, "He takes the free kick carefully" refers to a specific set-piece situation, not just any kick. Similarly, "The midfielder's pass was perfectly timed" implies a strategic action rather than a generic transfer of the ball.

3. Semantic Role and Function

Words such as "**mark**" and "**cross**" take on specialised meanings in football. "The defender is marking the striker closely" means guarding an opponent, which differs from the general meaning of "mark" as a sign or grade. Likewise, "The winger delivered a dangerous cross into the box" refers to a specific type of pass, not just moving across a space.

4. Event Decomposition and Interpretation

Complex events like scoring a goal or winning a corner are described using terms that encapsulate multiple semantic components. For example, “He scored a header from the corner kick” combines the action (header), the event (goal scoring), and the context (corner kick set-piece). Semantic analysis must capture these layered meanings to fully understand the commentary.

5. Challenges of Ambiguity

Some terms, such as "**offside**", while primarily referring to a rule violation, also describe a player's position relative to others. The phrase “The assistant referee raised the flag for offside” uses the term in a regulatory sense, but understanding the underlying spatial positioning is essential to grasp the full meaning.

6. Importance of Modifiers and Syntax

Modifiers and syntactic structures influence meaning. For example, “powerful shot on target” highlights not just the attempt to score but also the quality and precision of the action. Similarly, “played a brilliant ball through the defence” focuses on the tactical execution of a pass.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

A. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that football terminology in match reports is rich, context-dependent, and often polysemous, requiring careful semantic analysis to accurately interpret meaning. By combining linguistic theories with computational techniques such as syntactic parsing, semantic role labelling, and ontology-based representation, the research effectively captures both explicit and implicit meanings of football terms within their contextual environments. The findings highlight how modifiers, syntactic structures, and discourse context influence the interpretation of key football concepts like goals, passes, fouls, and player roles. Moreover, the application of logical inference enriches the understanding of match events beyond surface-level descriptions. Overall, this integrated semantic approach provides a comprehensive framework for analysing football language, which can be extended to other sports domains and supports the development of advanced natural language processing tools for sports media. The study contributes valuable insights into the dynamic

interplay between language and sport, emphasising the importance of context in semantic interpretation.

B. Suggestion

These suggestions can help deepen and broaden the research, making it more impactful and applicable in both academic and practical contexts.

1. Expand the Corpus Scope

Include match reports from different leagues, countries, and languages to analyse cross-cultural variations in football terminology and its semantic nuances.

2. Incorporate Multimodal Data

Complement textual analysis with audio or video commentary to explore how prosody, tone, and visual context influence the meaning and interpretation of football terms.

3. Develop a Football Terminology Ontology

Create a comprehensive, publicly accessible ontology or lexical database specific to football, which can be used by researchers and practitioners for semantic annotation and NLP tasks.

4. Apply Machine Learning Techniques

Use supervised or unsupervised machine learning models to automate the disambiguation and categorisation of football terms, improving scalability and efficiency.

5. Explore Pragmatic and Discourse Features

Investigate how football terminology functions in discourse, including metaphorical uses, idiomatic expressions, and rhetorical devices common in match reports.

6. User-Centred Applications

Develop tools or applications that leverage semantic analysis to assist commentators, journalists, or fans in understanding complex football terminology and enhancing match report quality.

7. Longitudinal Analysis

Study how football terminology evolves over time within match reports, reflecting changes in playing styles, rules, or media practices.

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