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**A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF IMPROMPTU NBA COMMENTARIES**

**Key words:** impromptu NBA commentaries, linguistic features, stylistics, register.

ABSTRACT

The article is a linguistic analysis of impromptu NBA commentaries, aiming to find some special linguistic rules in the genre of language use. It also attempts to broaden the research field of linguistics and helps understand and appreciate the language of the NBA. The study uses a statistical analysis of typical and striking language features of impromptu NBA commentaries. Essentially, it follows three intermingling steps: description (mainly linguistic), interpretation and evaluation. On the basis of the theory of language register, the author notes that impromptu NBA commentaries contain unique linguistic features at various levels: phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic and textual, all of which point to the evidence that the NBA commentary language should be treated as a different language style.

INTRODUCTION

Sport is a universal language which brings people together regardless of their origin, background, religious beliefs or economic status. When young people participate in sports or have access to physical education, they can experience real exhilaration and learn the ideals of teamwork and tolerance. That is why the United Nations is turning more and more to the world of sport for help in our work for peace and our efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Sport, as a sign of civilization, is an indispensable part of our social and cultural life. The development of sport, especially sports games, attracts great public attention. Sport is often associated with words like 'recreation', 'leisure', and 'play'. It is naturally regarded as a game, merry-making, frolic; in other words, it is an activity about fun, light-heartedness and escape from reality.

The NBA games are one of the most exciting, attractive and impressive sports, which tell us about

life in the same way like art does. They possess all the aforementioned characteristics of sport. Millions of fans are crazy about the NBA. The NBA games are truly international because of their unique charm, solidarity and harmony brought to audiences all over the world. A study of impromptu NBA commentaries seems therefore interesting and significant.

An impromptu commentary is a speech without a scripted draft. It is spontaneous and unplanned, and commentators cannot anticipate what will happen and how the event goes on. Generally speaking, impromptu sports commentaries consist mainly of three parts: background introduction, simultaneous commentaries and live comments [20]. Background introduction includes the background information concerning the event and the players. The former is to make the audience get to know the general situation of the event, the level of two sides and their positions on the court; the latter helps the audience understand technical features of star players and their aggressive spirit,

because players are the stars and the key figures on the court. Simultaneous commentaries describe the course of the game on the court. There are two important factors related to the commentaries: 1. Although the television can help the audience watch many vivid scenes, it never reveals the whole scene for reasons such as the court limits, vidicon angle, etc. Therefore, commentators have to explain and make comments to make up for these shortages; 2. One of the most characteristic charms connected with a sports game is the experience of the exciting and tense atmosphere. Simultaneous commentaries help revivify and enhance this kind of feeling with their special phonological features such as varying and uneven tempo, appropriate use of stress and loudness and so on. Live comments analyzing the performance and defensive and offensive techniques of the two sides are often made before the next section of the match or after the game. Commentators also express their own opinions about players and make comparisons between the two sides.

Impromptu sports commentaries, belonging to the category of spoken language, contain characteristic features: numerous incomplete sentences, often being simple sequences of phrases; fairly limited subordination; largely paratactically organized chunks linked with conjunctions *and*, *but*, *then* and more rarely, *if*; infrequent occurrences of passive constructions; frequent pauses, repetitions, generalized vocabulary and some tongue slips [3]. However, impromptu NBA commentaries are a kind of sport language, which focuses on what is happening all over the court. Attention is devoted to the teams and score, game venue and time, key players (their background, training, selection), scores summary, references to star players; key offensive and defensive statistics and results of previous games (series record or outcomes of most recent games) [4].

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed systematic investigation of the linguistic data. All the data were gathered from commentaries of NBA finals to expose particular language features of impromptu NBA commentaries and compare them with other language styles like those of advertisement, news, speech, spoken language and so on. Then, the collected spoken commentaries were transcribed and sorted out. Lastly, some typical and striking

language data were sampled for analysis [18]. SPSS 12.0 and cross-tabulation were used in statistical analysis.

## LINGUISTIC FEATURES AT THE PHONOLOGICAL LEVEL

In all languages, phonemes are not the only speech units which mark the meaning and deliver information. Prosodic features, also called suprasegmental units, accentuate the meaning, possess obvious stylistic features and can directly express speakers' feelings and attitudes. The suprasegmental phonological features include the pitch (or tone), stress, melody (intonation), loudness, tempo, rhythm and pause. These features are distinctive in the sense that their omission from or alteration in an utterance may result in the change of the meaning of the utterance [16]. Varieties of spoken English tend to be primarily differentiated through non-segmental features of this kind.

Impromptu sports commentaries with their enthusiasm and vividness display great differences in suprasegmental phonology. The present study focused on stress, tempo, pause, length and loudness. Following Crystal and Davy [5] suprasegmental contrasts were marked using symbols and abbreviations below:

- tone-unit boundary: | ;
- stress: strong stress: " ; ordinary stress: ' ; weak stress: unmarked;
- clipped syllable: when a syllable is spoken very rapidly, or abruptly, this is indicated by a dot under the vowel, e.g. but;
- drawled syllables: when some part of a syllable is slowed down, the lengthened segment is indicated by     e.g. really;
- held syllable: these are indicated by =, e.g. backwards, jab; they occur when one makes ready to articulate a syllable but delays the release of its initial segment. The delay produces a 'bottling up' of the air for the articulation, which results in an anticipatory silence, perhaps also some audible vocal cord vibration, and a greater emphasis on what follows;
- unit pause: - equivalent in length to one beat or cycle of a person's normal rhythm of speech (it seems best to relate a speaker's pauses to his own speech rhythm rather than to some absolute measure);

- brief pause: · which is less than a unit pause;
- double pause: - -;
- treble pause: - - -.

Side notes:

- loudness: forte, fortiss(imo), piano, pianiss(imo), cresc(endo), dimin(uendo).
- speed: alleg(ro), allegriss(imo), lento, lentiss(imo), accel(erando), rall(entando).

Sample 1

	Malone —"stripped· by "Michael   ·	(1)
'accel'	'to the four stolen By MJ'   ·	(2)
'alleg' 'forte'	"Jordan's "got·it'   ·	(3)
"forte"	"The "Bulls can 'win it ·   "right "here"   ·	(4)
	The Bulls can win it   · <u>unbe</u> "lievable   —	(5)
	'Seventeen —'seconds —	(6)
	from game 'seven — or from championship	(7)
'accel'	number 'six   ——"Jordan to drive	(8)
	'hang 'fire·"score'	(9)
"fortiss"	"he "scores"   —"the "Bulls' "lead	(10)
	87-86"   ·	(11)
	5.2 seconds left   —	(12)
'rall'	'Michael— 'Jordan   — running on <u>fumes</u>   —	(13)
	with 45 points'   —	(14)
'lento'	'Stockton — screen   ·and   roll   ·	(15)
	lifts the shot'   —	(16)
'accel'	'it is no good'   ·	(17)
'allegriss'	'Rebound back   ·tapped   ·it's over'   ·	(18)
"fortiss" 'alleg'	"Bulls win the "title"   ·	(19)
"fortiss" 'alleg'	"The "Bulls' are the "world champs	(20)
	a'gain"   · Oh   "my —"word   ·	(21)
'alleg'	'Who· would have th <u>unk</u> it'   ·	(22)
	The 'Chicago 'B <u>ulls</u>   — have	(23)
	won their 6 <sup>th</sup> NBA "Championship	(24)

game that fluctuates rapidly and dramatically. A glance at the side notes shows that there is a good deal of prosodic features, which are especially well represented. The field and the mode of discourse determine the appropriate use of phonological features, as the former is concerned with the content of what is being said, and the latter covers the channel of communication: written or spoken. The NBA game is a most exciting sport, so when reporting what is happening on the court, commentators tend to deliver all information in an attractive way, and the use of prosodic features can rightly reflect it.

The sample contains only 15 sentences and 105 words, but it gives a good image of the wide range of phonological features that an expert commentator may use when confronted with a

Sample 1 illustrates a type of discourse with a considerable amount of fluctuation and variety in its sound. Table 1 shows the prosodic features occurring in the sample.

**Table 1.** Occurrences of respective prosodic features

	Stress	Tempo	Pause	Loudness
Strong stress	18			
Ordinary stress	11			
Accelerando		3		
Allegro		4		
Allegrisssimo		1		
Lento		1		
Rallentando		1		
Brief pause			22	
The unit pause			15	
A double pause			2	
Forte				2
Fortissimo				3
Total	29	9	39	5

### *Appropriate use of stress*

Stress is the prominence (i.e. the force and intensity of air from the lungs) given to one part of a word or a longer utterance. Word stress is important in making a difference in the meaning of a word [21]. In connected speech it is subject to the speaker's will and the meaning he/she wishes to convey, such as the use of contrastive stress, which is capable of highlighting any word in a sentence, even a word or part of a word that is not usually stressed.

The above sample shows a variety of stress types: strong stress, ordinary stress and weak stress. They are used appropriately and frequently. The total number of words in the transcript is 105; strong stress occurs 18 times as in *Bulls (4)*, *unbelievable (5)*, *scores (10)*, *title (18)* etc.; ordinary stress occurs 11 times as in *seventeen (6)*, *seven (7)*, *six (8)*, *hang (9)*, *fire (10)* etc.; and weak stress is unmarked. In addition, the commentators often put the strong stress on content words such as nouns, verbs, adverbs, pronouns, and numerals as they contain a lot of valuable information.

Commentators use syllable or word stress to emphasize a certain word or meaning as well as express their feelings and emotions such as surprise, anger, fear and joy [21]. Sample 1 reveals the commentator's surprise, joy and excitement towards an action or score, or attitudes towards a player's performance, when strong stress is used.

In impromptu NBA commentaries, the use of appropriate stresses often fluctuates and creates excitement for the audience.

### *Varying and uneven tempo*

Tempo refers to the relative speed of utterance. In most cases, one tends to speak at an approximately constant rate, but both syllables and longer stretches may be uttered with distinctive changes in speed to convey different meanings. A slow tempo is related to special care and seriousness, whereas a fast tempo suggests an off-hand dismissal or cheerful levity. When a speaker is excited or impatient, he/she tends to speak at a quicker tempo. When hesitant, doubtful or low-spirited, he/she tends to slow down [23].

Tempo in impromptu NBA commentaries always varies and is flexible. The analysis of Sample 1 shows that this style features constant fast speed sentences. Sentences are accelerando as in (2), (8) and (17); allegro as in (3) (19), (20) and (22); and allegrissimo as in (18). Most of the time the commentator tends to speak very fast as basketball games go fast and the time is tense compared with the course of the game. The commentator must accelerate his or her speech to keep the pace with the speed of the ball, or sometimes even exceed it. He does not lose any chance to report everything about the event, and hopes to create excitement and tense atmosphere for the audience. Sentences with a slow tempo are few but can also be noted as in (13) and (15); at this moment the commentator does not worry about the time, he only aims to leave a deep impression upon the audience.

There are some other factors making fast speech a main phonological feature. First, if they also feel very excited about what they see, the commentators tend to speak fast; second, when the ball is passed rapidly between the players and the game is going on very intensely, they speak rapidly; third, when a player is ready to shoot, the commentators unconsciously accelerate tempo because the speed of speech is associated with urgency – the delivery of an important message in a hurry.

Another point worth noticing is that fast tempo occurs often accompanied with word or syllable stress and appropriate loudness as in (19), (20) and so on. Since they desire to create excitement for listeners, the commentators' personal response to an exciting activity make them

produce a lot of sentences that stand out because of thickly clustered prosodic features. A varying and uneven tempo makes commentaries fluctuate rapidly and dramatically, which can then make the audience feel like the players: sometimes relaxed and sometimes tense.

### *Pause*

Pause is a temporary stop or silence in the flow of speech utterance together with the tone unit. Voiced pauses such as /m/, /ə:/, /əm/ often show the normal non-fluency of casual or spontaneous speech. Silent pause occurs regularly in line with grammatical structure: at the end of a sentence or a clause, word groups, or at the boundary between words. It is stylistically significant for some spoken varieties of English [23].

Impromptu NBA commentaries are a unique language style with a very fast speed, so the use of pauses in many places may be distinguished. Pauses are used to indicate the boundaries of syntactic structures – phrases, clauses, or sentences – or to create a particular rhetorical effect, for example, orators use pauses to attract or captivate audiences, and common speakers to keep listeners guessing.

In Sample 1 there are 22 occurrences of brief pause, but the unit pause occurs 15 times. When the commentators are reporting on a tense situation, they cannot pause to plan the next thing to say and they need not pay attention to cohesion and coherence; they are only delivering all the information to the audience, because impromptu NBA commentaries are colloquial, casual and spontaneous. Of course, apart from unit pauses there are also many double pauses and treble pauses. When the commentators describe information about the state of the game or its background, when they only make a casual comment, or when description of an action is a means of filling time, long pauses are often produced, accompanying the image and helping to maintain the overall cohesion. The use of long pauses is different from other language styles such as daily conversations, speech or news, in which a long pause may cause embarrassment or deliberately create a particular rhetorical effect, but NBA commentaries are not only for hearing but also for seeing, which is determined by the special register of the commentary language.

### *Timing of segments and syllables*

In speaking a speaker sets up his overall tempo and within it the listener sets up certain expectations about the relative lengths of different segments in different stress and intonation environments. It is called “normal” length. It is, however, possible for a speaker to extend a segment or syllable, to lengthen it for stylistic purposes and to lay special weight on a given word. Here the extension has an intensificatory function [2]. The length of a sound can vary in tone languages, depending on whether the syllable in which it occurs is stressed or not on the particular tone with which the syllable is uttered [8].

When reporting on an exciting action or a beautiful shot, commentators often extend a sound by means of numerous *drawled* segments or syllables, which is one of the commonest ways of adding emphasis to words. The NBA commentator appears to supplement this device to draw out the vowel of the tonic syllable like in *unbe"lievable* (5), *score* (9), *my* (20), and *Bulls* (22) in the above sample, thus giving it an even greater prominence. A frequent occurrence of drawled syllables always intermingles with strong stress, forte, fortissimo, allegro or allegrissimo. The commentators often express excitement, cheer or surprise and produce a major climax through this device. On the other hand, when actions on the court change rapidly or the atmosphere becomes tense suddenly, the commentators also use clipped syllables as in (3), (18), and (22).

### *Use of loudness*

Loudness refers to the strength or weakness of sound, which occurs between syllables and between phrases or sentences. It is classified into four ranks: forte and fortissimo, piano and pianissimo, crescendo, and diminuendo. Forte expresses excitement, anger, annoyance; whereas piano expresses depression, puzzlement, fun, satisfaction, apology, etc [21]. In impromptu NBA commentaries, forte and fortissimo turn up frequently as in *Jordan's got it* (3), *The Bulls can win it right here* (4), *He scores! The Bulls lead 87-86* (11), *Bulls win the title* (19), and *The Bulls are the world champs again* (20). The commentators use forte and fortissimo frequently to express their excitement and surprise intermingling with stress or allegro to add emphasis to words and sentences, on the contrary, weak sound can hardly be noted, which is determined by the special

register of the NBA commentary language. The use of strong sound mixed with other prosodic features makes impromptu NBA commentaries attractive and exciting like the NBA game itself. Moreover, listeners outside the court can also be captivated by this atmosphere.

### LINGUISTIC FEATURES AT THE LEXICAL LEVEL

The English language takes many forms, each with its own conventions and rules. The language used in commentaries is a special form of English in the sense that it conforms to conventions and rules that differ somewhat from the way things are done in other varieties or dialects of the language. The choice of vocabulary or word class and the appearance rate of a certain word class are closely related to the theme and content of the style of impromptu commentaries, for the ultimate aim is to help the spectators and the audience get as much information as possible and create a tense and exciting atmosphere. The field of discourse restricts this, and according to Halliday [9] it is likely to have a major influence on the selection of vocabulary and of those grammatical patterns which express our experience of the world.

### Word structure

Stylists usually set six letters or three syllables in a word as a standard to analyze the length of words. Words with more than six letters are usually regarded as long. Generally, long words may be of Latin, French or Greek origin, and are usually formal words. They may also be derivational or compounding words, which have a relatively complicated structure. Impromptu NBA commentaries are in the form of spoken language, in which short words are frequently encountered (Table 2).

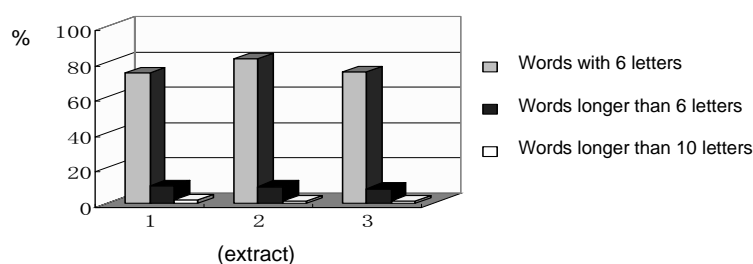
Table 2 shows that in NBA commentaries the average percentage of words up to six letters is 76.43% and the highest percentage is 81.56%. The average percentage of words with more than six letters is 17.3%. Like in Wang's [21] statistics concerning daily conversations, in impromptu commentaries and even advertisements, the percentage of long words does not exceed 20%. Long words are hard to be encountered, and in the three extracts there are only six words with more than ten letters. On the other hand, the words mostly used are very common.

It is thus evident that the words used are not only short but also of simple structure. Most of them are monosyllabic, which makes the commentaries easy to listen to. On the one hand, it

**Table 2.** Word structure

	Total words	Word with 6 letters	Percentage	Words longer than 6 letters	Percentage	Words longer than 10 letters	Percentage
Extract 1	177	130	73.44	17	9.60	3	1.69
Extract 2	179	146	81.56	17	9.49	2	1.11
Extract 3	218	162	74.31	18	8.25	1	0.45
Average	191	146	76.43	17.3	9.05	2	1.04

Note: proper nouns are not included



makes the language more concise and lively, and on the other hand, it saves time. As the actions on the court always move fast, NBA commentators are eager to deliver all the information to the audience and listeners. They have to speak with a fast tempo and employ the simplest ways to express the most precise meaning.

### Lexical density

In linguistic research, lexical density is the rate of lexical words and total words. It is calculated according to the following formula [13]:

T = total words of text  
L = lexical words of text  
lexical density = 100% L/T

Grammatical words are those which express grammatical meanings, e.g. conjunctions, prepositions, articles, and pronouns. Those with the lexical meaning, for instance, referring to substance, action and quality, including nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, are lexical words [10]. Sample 2 demonstrates the calculating method (words in bold face are lexical words):

### Sample 2

The **time**, 18.  
**Shot! Jordan! Michael Jordan!**  
There's a **steal** by **Doherty**. **Here comes Michael Jordan!**  
(another announcer) Uh-oh! Uh-oh!  
**Matt Doherty...**  
**Passes to Jordan!**  
I **guess** that is a **pretty fitting end** to the **ball game**.  
**Jordan---**look at that!  
**Kenny Smith looking for Jordan!**  
Oh! **Beautiful!**  
**Beautiful! Absolutely beautiful!**  
.....  
**Doherty** from about 14.  
**Rebound!**  
.....  
Ahead to **Paxson**.  
**Pax** with a **lab** for **Jordan**  
Whoo hoo!  
**Jordan steals it.**  
**Michael** in **deep**, **turn** around **shot**.  
**Good!** And a **foul** on **Danny Schayes!**

Sample 2 indicates the highest lexical density at only 53.40% and the lowest at 45.90%. The average lexical density is 50.82%, which is a little higher than the lexical density of spoken language, calculated by Ure [13], who in 1971 showed that the lexical density of spoken language was 40%. Brown and Yule [3] also revealed that speech contained less densely packed information. The language of impromptu NBA commentaries, as different from the language of newspaper reporting which contain a great amount of information, has a loose organization with scattered information.

**Table 3.** Lexical density

	Total words	Lexical words	Grammatical words	Lexical density
Extract 1	88	47	41	53.40%
Extract 2	79	42	37	53.16%
Extract 3	122	56	66	45.90%
Average	96	48	48	50.82%

### Word class

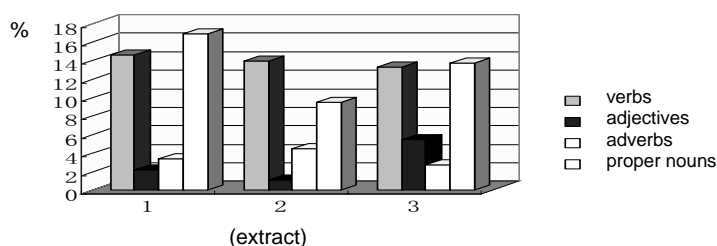
Linguists classify lexis into ten categories encompassing nouns, verbs, pronouns, numerals, adjectives, conjunctions, articles, adverbs, prepositions and interjections. They are further divided into content words and functional words. Nouns, verbs, pronouns, numerals, adjectives and adverbs are content words and the other ones are functional words. Content words such as nouns, verbs, numerals, and adjectives obviously fulfill significant functions because they are accurate in conducting positive evaluations, efficient in leaving profound impressions upon the listeners.

Table 4 shows that the percentage of verbs is as high as 13.92%, which is the highest in terms of word class. Proper nouns, with the percentage of 13.40, also display a high rate, which is hard to find in any other style. This is because the players and changes of action are the focus in NBA games and the audience needs to know this. The frequency of adjectives and adverbs are low, and they mainly describe sequence, place and direction. Those words on subjective judgment and with emotional color are seldom encountered in the style of commentaries. The average percentage of adjectives like “unbelievable, beautiful, spectacular, etc” is only 3.14%.

**Table 4.** Word class

	Total words	Verbs	Percentage	Adjectives	Percentage	Adverbs	Percentage	Proper nouns	Percentage
Extract 1	177	26	14.6	4	2.25	6	3.38	30	16.94
Extract 2	179	25	13.96	2	1.11	8	4.46	17	9.49
Extract 3	218	29	13.30	12	5.50	6	2.75	30	13.76
Average	191	26.6	13.92	6	3.14	6.66	3.49	25.6	13.40

Note: proper nouns mainly refer to team names and players' names; auxiliary verbs are not included



### Proper nouns

The frequency of proper nouns, like names of players and teams, is very high with an average percentage of 13.4 (Table 4), which is seldom noted in other varieties of spoken language. It is well known that players are the highlight of the game, and the NBA commentators try to report on any players' actions clearly, for example, who shoots a three-point goal, who misses a basket, who fouls, who gets a free throw, and which side leads – all of which is what the spectators are interested in.

*(1) Malone gets the shot away, it's in! Carl Malone keeps pouring 'em in. Malone's 38 points were changing Chicago's party plans, to travel plans. Malone personally pushing the series back towards Utah.*

In (1), the name "Malone" appears four times in such a short fraction. Malone scores continually, makes a great contribution to his team, and pushes the atmosphere to the climax, and he shows his excellent technique and smart and clever defense and offense. It seems that he is the hero on the court and the world belongs to him. The audience acclaims his performance and are very excited, so the commentator cannot help focusing on him for a few seconds more. What is more, the audience likes the commentators to focus on the highlights and the winners; it is a kind of psychological need or spiritual satisfaction.

*(2) In the games' first play, Scottie Pippen's back gave out. Scottie Pippen leaves the bench and heads for the locker room. The Bulls were wounded and the Jazz were ready to pounce. They have all the momentum and the Bulls are back on their heels. Chicago's burden now sat squarely on the shoulders of Michael Jordan. Michael Jordan's going to have to carry the load.*

In (2), there are 65 words, but the names of the team and the players appear 8 times. It reports on Pippen's injury and the passive effect on the Bulls he caused, as well as the situation of the two teams. This information gives the audience all what they want to know.

### Verbs

Table 4 shows that the frequency of verbs is the highest with an average percentage of 13.9, which is natural because the commentary language is to report sport. Commentators often use a lot of verbs to describe each performance and action.

Sample 1 in the phonology section contains altogether 21 occurrences of verbs, including 13 action verbs such as *screen, roll, rebound, drive* etc. Meanwhile, many vivid verbs and some verb phrases that are different from daily use can be often encountered such as *pass, shot, break, press, foul, cut, dodge, shift, post, penetrating, retreat, dash, weave, hack, strike, dribble, block, block a shot, follow in, dunk, roll, screen, trap, defense,*



*offense, hold, attack, lay up, plug, steal, charge, miss, travel, drive, hang, fire, score, tap in, fill in* and so on. These concrete action verbs reflect the characteristics of basketball and show that both NBA games and impromptu NBA commentaries seem to have a great glamour to the audience. It is also worth noticing that there are few occurrences of abstract verbs and state verbs, for example, in Sample 1 there are five abstract verbs such as *win, think*, etc., and three verbs describing state, e.g. *be*.

#### *Adjectives and adverbs*

The proportion of adjectives and adverbs in the register of impromptu NBA commentaries is very small: 3.14 and 3.49 percent, respectively. They mainly describe motion, direction and place. There are a few adjectives tending to be subjective and emotional. It is determined by the style of commentaries, which focuses on objective description.

Several regular adjectives like *good, marvelous, unbelievable, incredible, outstanding* and *excellent* are used to express the commentators' passions for good shots, e.g.

(3) *Nash is good, he is really good. He missed a shot and it went way up higher than the clock. That is outstanding.*

(4) *Baron Davis, has just brought it in from 92 feet away, it's good.*

(5) *Throw up, and good! Good! Incredible! Absolutely incredible!*

(6) *The Bulls can win it! Unbelievable!*

(7) *Malone, a cross court pass to Stockton with a three on the way, good!*

The frequency of these adjectives is not the same. "Good" is much more frequently used than any other adjectives. First, "good" is a very common and colloquial word and every person can say it out without thinking to express what one thinks is fine or great. Second, the NBA commentator tends to use the word since he has learnt how to use it. Third, the word "good" is simple and there are only four letters and one syllable, so it is easy to think of it. Meanwhile, the commentator frequently uses it in order to save time as the game is intense and he has to follow the speed of the ball.

"Marvelous" and "excellent" have the same meaning "very good or wonderful", and *incredible* and *unbelievable* "impossible, surprising or difficult to believe". The four words appear seldom. The commentator employs these words only when finding that *good* is not enough at all to describe how much the scene is wonderful and express what he feels in his mind. However, they have a function similar to that of *good*, but they express a stronger feeling of applause.

#### *Numerals*

Numerals in the language of NBA cover time, scores, match scores, players' background, record details, etc. The biggest concern of using numbers is to be brief and precise, stating the match time, statistics and match results.

Numerals contain lots of information. Through these numbers, the audience can have a good understanding of the strength of the two teams and the players:

##### 1) Match scores:

(8) *McGrady's dramatic jumper gives Rockets a 2-0 lead.*

(9) *The Bulls' lead 87-86!*

(10) *By the second quarter interval, Spurs were ahead 51:49.*

##### 2) Players' background:

(11) *Duncan and Ginobili combined for 95 points and 40 rebounds in San Antonio's two home victories last week.*

(12) *McGrady scores 37 points to push series to Game 7.*

(13) *Mike, 6.8 foot, played for 11 years in NBA.*

(14) *Number 17, Charle Mode, 6.5 foot.*

##### 3) Record details:

(15) *Stoudmire scored 18 points in the second quarter.*

(16) *Steve Nash had 29 assists for the Suns.*

(17) *Ginobili, another three!*

(18) *Malone, a cross court pass to Stockton with a three on the way, good!*

(19) *Bryant 4 for 4 from the line.*

##### 4) Time

(20) *5.2 seconds left, Michael Jordan running on fumes with 45 points.*

(21) *5 minutes to go, Bulls are up by 4.*

(22) *There are only 3 minutes left.*

### *Third-person pronoun*

All the pronouns in Sample 1 and Sample 2 are third-person pronouns except for one sentence “I guess that is pretty fitting end to the ball game” in Sample 2. The commentators are outsiders, unlike the players; their function is to make objective commentaries or descriptions for the audience, and they cannot express their own opinions or subjective judgments, which is similar to the language of news.

### *Technical terms and sports jargons*

According to Beard [1] all occupations, to varying degrees, have special codes related to their particular fields of activity. The more specialized the occupation, the more technical language there is likely to be. The world of advanced computing, for instance, has many vocabulary items which are beyond the understanding of most people, even those who regularly use computers. Sports, like religion, law, medicine and education, has linguistic rituals which involve not only vocabulary but also grammar and discourse types.

A typical feature of impromptu NBA commentaries is a considerable number of technical terms and sports jargons intended for specialist audiences. Lay people can hardly understand what they mean, if they watch NBA games rarely or know nothing about the NBA. An analysis of technical terms and sport jargons may help understand and appreciate the language of impromptu NBA commentaries.

Most technical terms consist of words and phrases from everyday life, but with a restricted, and usually fairly precise meaning, as in *at home, on the road, call, one-one-one defense, paint, zone defense, illegal defense, incidental contact, three-second violation, pick-and-roll, double pump, free throw lane, defensive rebound, field goal percentage, etc.*

As regards jargon, Crystal [7] provides two definitions: 1. technical language of a special field; and 2. obscure use of specialized language. For those who use the specialized language it is a sign of technical expertise, for those who do not it is obscure and confusing. There are numerous NBA jargons in impromptu NBA commentaries, e.g.

(23) *Oh man, did you see Webber make that **air ball**. That was terrible.* (An air ball is when someone shoots a basketball and it comes out so far off the hoop that it does not touch the rim. If a shot touches

the backboard but not the rim, it is still considered an air ball.)

(24) *Steve Nash was on the fastbreak with Shawn Marion on one side and Amare Stoudemire on the other. He looked towards Amare then threw a **no look pass** to Marion who finished with a dunk.* (When an offensive player has the ball and suddenly looks one way while passing the ball the other. The result is usually an easy layup.)

(25) *When Michael Jordan was **in the zone**, the Chicago Bulls were never going to lose a game.* (When a player is playing so well that he/she does not even need to think about what they are doing. ‘In the zone’ usually refers to a mental condition when a player feels he can make any shot he wants and does.)

(26) *Last night, Tony Parker was so **cold** that he only scored 3 baskets all night.* (Cold: not making shots. Whatever the reason Americans refer to a player’s ability to score as being “cold”. Players try to prevent becoming cold during the game by shooting up to one hundred shots during pre-game practices.)

(27) *John couldn't seem to find his shooting touch today. He threw up multiple **bricks** before finally making a bucket.* (A brick is a shot that was not even close to going in the basket. A brick is when a shot hits low on the front of the rim or bounces up high after hitting the back of the rim. In NBA games, when a player shoots a ‘brick’ shot, the fans will begin chanting “brick, brick, brick” to make the shooter feel ashamed.)

### *Lack of fillers*

Although impromptu commentaries are spontaneous, there are no meaningless words or fillers, e.g. *well, erm, I think, y’know, of course*, which are likely to occur in spoken language. The NBA commentators have undergone specialized training, and they must be affirmative and undoubted so that the audience have confidence in them. In addition, commentators have no time to stop or insert such fillers, and they have to take every minute to report what is going on on the court to the audience as NBA games always move fast.

### *Phrase repetition*

Repetition is generally classified as unintended or unnecessary repetition and reiteration. The former is a kind of grammatical error and the

latter is often used to express strong feelings and urgent appeal, and emphasize some meaning and form a lively rhythm [19]. Repetition, a component part of natural language use, is an important tool in language communication, which exists in both written and spoken language. From the point of view of language itself, repetition can be related to the form, i.e. repeating some sound, word or sentence, or semantics, i.e. repeating the same meaning [14]. The language of impromptu NBA commentaries abounds in repetitions, e.g.:

(28) *Jordan on the drive falls down underneath.*  
*Ya! Oh! Oh! Oh!*  
*Ball loose!*

(29) *The lead pass to Michael Jordan.*  
*This spells trouble.*  
*Oh! oh! oh!*  
*Jordan, who has it on the break.*  
*Driving all the way in....*  
*Ya! Oh! Oh! Oh!*  
*He's got it.*  
*Unbelievable! Unbelievable!*

(30) *The time, 18.*  
*Shot! Jordan! Michael Jordan!*  
*There's a steal by Doherty. Here comes Michael Jordan!*  
*Uh-oh! Uh-oh!*

(31) *Oh! Beautiful! Beautiful! Absolutely beautiful!*

(32) *The Bulls win it! They win it!*

(33) *Bounce pass, Yes, he dropped it back. He dropped it back to Scottie.*

(34) *Foul, Michael Jordan. Michael Jordan -- he's out of here. Jordan's out of here. They threw him out of the game.*

(35) *What a play! What a play!*

The above examples give evidence of sound repetition, word repetition, phrase repetition and sentence repetition, and they usually appear at the crucial moment of a game. Examples (28), (29) and (30) repeat the sound “oh” and “uh-oh” in the same form; (31) repeats the word “beautiful”; (32), (33) and (34) repeat parts of sentences like “win it”, “dropped it back”, “out of here”; and (35) repeats the whole sentence “What a play!”.

Repetition has an emphatic function, which expresses the speaker's strong feelings [14]. The commentators always keep on repeating, because

they have been putting the whole heart into the court with the players all along. They are not able to find any better words to express their excitement and applause or pity, when seeing a marvelous shot or a pitiful miss or foul. What they can do is to express strong feelings by loud repetition, for repetition is a simple, short, easy and time-saving expression. On the other hand, the phonological features used in repetition are often vivid and exciting, and can make the audience at home feel how exciting and beautiful the game is and how tense the atmosphere is. As a matter of fact, this is what a successful and popular commentator should do. A wonderful game plus a good commentator is what the audience like.

#### LINGUISTIC FEATURES AT THE SYNTACTIC LEVEL

Generally speaking, a sentence is a sequence of words. This part discusses how words are combined to form sentences to achieve the stylistic effects. The discussion focuses on the sentence structure, verb phrases, noun phrases, and sentence types.

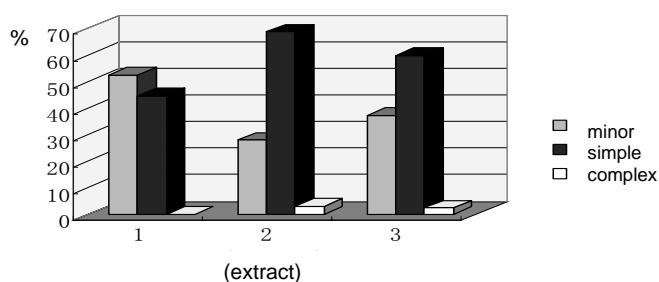
##### *Sentence structure*

Table 5 presents different sentence structure types used in NBA commentaries. They are mainly minor sentences, simple sentences and a few complex sentences. Sentence structure is influenced by the mode of text and the functional tenor, which is determined by the special register of impromptu commentaries. Table 5 reveals that the frequency of simple sentences is the highest, followed by minor sentences, which may be regarded as a style marker.

Minor sentences show that the style of impromptu NBA commentaries is very informal, similar to spoken language, which is determined by the field and tenor of discourse, as the field affects the selection of vocabulary and grammatical patterns, whereas the tenor is concerned with the degrees of formality of the language used. Minor sentences which break the grammatical rules of sentence formation occur frequently in impromptu NBA commentaries. These minor sentences are basically without a verb and with or without an adverbial element, e.g.

**Table 5.** Sentence structure

	Total sentences	Minor	Percentage	Simple	Percentage	Complex	Percentage
Extract 1	38	20	52.63	17	44.73	0	0
Extract 2	32	9	28.12	22	68.75	1	3.12
Extract 3	40	15	37.5	24	60.00	1	2.50
Average	36.6	14.6	39.89	21	57.37	0.67	1.83



(36) *Doherty to Black.*

(37) *Jordan to the hoop—*

(38) *Jordan down the lane, all the way.*

(39) *Jordan trying to shake off Starks.*

(40) *Michael in from the right and the jam!*

(41) *Oh! A spectacular move by Michael Jordan.*

(42) *Jordan, a running conversation with Stacey Augmon.*

(43) *Jordan and Starks chatting with each other.*

A complex sentence like “*And this crowd providing a standing ovation, as the Chicago Bulls will make their second straight trip to the NBA finals, where the Portland Trail Blazers await.....This is a series everybody has been waiting for for two years.*” is seldom to be found. It is often based on the written language. Compound sentences are occasionally encountered, as in the sentence “*It plays you tough, and it takes its toll on you.*”

As regards simple sentences, there is a great quantity of them, as all the minor sentences are simple sentences. There is also the possibility of occurrence of some ungrammatical sentences, and ones which may be seen as tongue slips:

(44) *The world, the country wants to see Portland VS Chicago.*

(45) *He look for something to get him in this frame of mind.*

(46) *In the NBA, there's a lot of great athletes.*

(47) *This is the greatest performance may be ever in the history of this league.*

(48) *What they get to see every night.*

The error is often a question of agreement or dangling sentences, etc, but the possibility is very slight, which is caused due to time pressure. However, it indicates that language does not always adhere to formalities in practical use but concentrates on the expression of meaning.

In the language of impromptu NBA commentaries, there are some occurrences of incomplete sentences that are often interrupted by a period before they are completed, e.g. “*even though the Bulls|would win both games*”, “*when Miller and Jordan|would square off again*”, “*Despite Michael's promises. The Pacers led|by 13 points early on*”.

#### *Sentence length*

The average sentence length varies depending on language register. According to Wang Zuoliang [19] there are fewer than 12 words

per sentence on the average in daily conversation, 28 words in news reports and more than 40 in most legal documents. The average sentence length of commentaries is only 14 words, which approximates to the style of daily conversation. It is widely believed that the longer the average sentence length is, the more formal the language variety is. The average sentence length of all language varieties is 17.8 words per sentence [12]. Short sentences are characteristic of spoken language.

Table 6 shows that the average sentence length of impromptu NBA commentaries is 5.21 words per sentence. The longest one is fewer than 6 words per sentence. These figures reveal that the average sentence length is far shorter than that of daily conversation.

**Table 6.** Average sentence length

	Total words	Total sentences	Average sentence length
Extract 1	177	38	4.65
Extract 2	179	32	5.59
Extract 3	218	40	5.45
Total	574	110	5.21

**Table 7.** Sentence length

Word quantity	Total sentences	1-5	Percentage	6-10	Percentage	11-15	Percentage	16-20	Percentage
Extract 1	38	26	68.42	10	26.31	1	2.63	1	2.63
Extract 2	32	22	68.75	8	25.00	2	6.25	0	0
Extract 3	40	27	67.50	7	17.50	6	15.00	0	0
Average	36.6	25	68.30	8.3	22.67	3	8.19	0.33	0.90

Note: Quantity of lexical items is calculated like this: 3-on-2 = 1 word; Here's = 1 word; Michael Jordan = 2 words; 1-point = 1 word

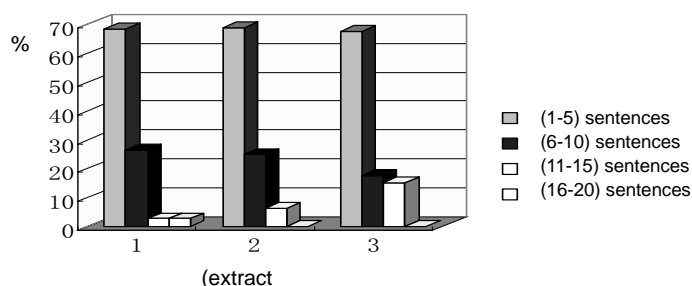


Table 7 presents a detailed analysis of sentence length. It shows that 68.30% sentences contain 1-5 words per sentence on average, which is a very high frequency; whereas 8.3% sentences contain 6-10 words per sentence. It proves that the commentaries feature short sentences and are more colloquial than daily conversations. As Wang [21] certifies that most sentences in daily conversation contain less than 10 words.

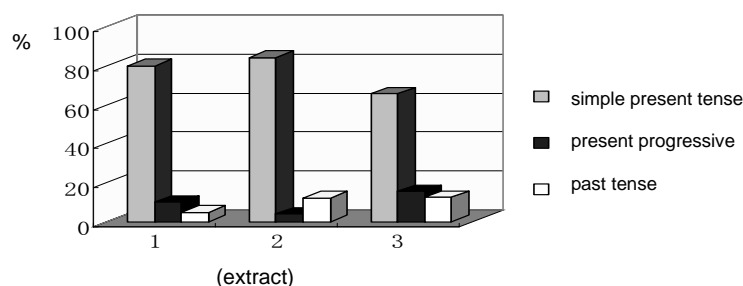
*Tense and voice*

The use of tense is related to the field of discourse, which determines the selection of transitivity systems. When (person, tense and mood) are selected from the systems, sentence structure is generated [15].

Table 8 analyses the choice of tenses in impromptu NBA commentaries. The tenses are mainly simple present tense, present progressive and past tense. Present perfect progressive and future tense seldom occur in this variety. The table shows that simple present tense is used most frequently (75.39%), which is determined by the register of the commentary language and the function of simple present tense. First, simple

**Table 8.** Tenses

	Total verb phrases with tense	Simple present tense	Percentage	Present progressive	Percentage	Past tense	Percentage
Extract 1	20	16	80.0	2	10.0	1	5.0
Extract 2	25	21	84.0	1	4.0	3	12.0
Extract 3	32	21	65.6	5	15.6	4	12.5
Average	25.6	19.3	75.39	2.6	11.15	2.6	10.15



present tense has the function of simultaneously commentating, which is often used in live reporting, performance, illustration, plot introduction and operation introduction; second, it has the function of vivid description [22]. Impromptu NBA commentaries are instant, so the commentators tend to employ simple present tense to make the listeners be personally on the scene. In addition, the tenses the game is and the faster the actions move, the simpler the verb phrases are and the more frequent simple present tense is used, from which it is proved that language structure will change with the real situation in the face of language choice.

The percentage of present progressive use is the second highest with 11.15%. Past tense, present perfect progressive and future tense can be also occasionally used as in: *The Chicago Bulls have defeated the Miami Heat in three straight games; It will be the Knicks ball; He dropped it to Scottie.* Also “-ing” participles and verb phrases with modal auxiliaries occur occasionally in impromptu NBA commentaries.

As regards voice, passive voice seldom turns up. In three extracts, there are totally 110 sentences, but only 3 sentences use passive voice such as “*Now they’re being challenged; they are stunned here at Chicago stadium.*” In NBA games, the commentators make commentaries in sequential order, i.e. describing or reporting what they saw, and then speak out at once, and they cannot and have no time to store information. What

commentators see at first sight is the person who carries out the action, then the action itself and, lastly, the person who receives the action, which agrees with the normal order in English. If passive voice is used, sentence pattern “N + be + V + by + N” is needed. However, the information is as much as that in “N + V + N”. It is evident that passive voice seems uneconomical because commentators can organize sentences after the action is finished, which does not meet the requirements of a game that develops and changes so rapidly.

#### *Noun phrases*

Premodifiers are determiners, numbers, pronouns, adjectives, or nouns with an adjectival function, which appear to the left of the head noun. The NBA commentators mainly use premodification, which is an obvious and economical device for making nominal groups more precise and for adding descriptive detail. They usually use single adjectives as in *a sensational player, the best player, a spectacular move*; but sometimes they do use a little complex modifier as in *a pretty fitting end, a big physical wide New York team*.

When expressing the genitive case, the commentators like to use “s” instead of “of” such as *Michael Jordan’s game, the Bulls’ hopes, the Lakers’ record*, which helps save time and make expressions more precise.

### Sentence types

Sentence is the smallest language unit used to communicate and convey thoughts; it can be a classified statement, question, command and exclamation depending on its communicative function [25].

Table 9 shows that the frequency of each sentence type is quite different; statements have the highest percentage, followed by exclamations, questions and commands (Table 9 shows no commands used in the commentaries). This is determined by the tenor of discourse of NBA commentaries because the tenor influences the speaker's selection of mood (his choice of speech role: making statements, asking questions). As the aim of commentaries is to state what is happening on the court, the commentators' most useful function is to provide any possible information, or explain any bits of activity of the game, a great number of statements are needed. In the process of commentating, the commentators cannot communicate with the audience directly and there is no possibility to ask the audience to do something, so there are nearly no imperative sentences.

Meanwhile, a certain number of exclamatory sentences can be noted such as "What a beautiful shot!" This kind of sentence can affect the audience and make the audience be personally on the scene. In addition, there are some questions included impromptu NBA commentaries, which will attract more attention of language researchers.

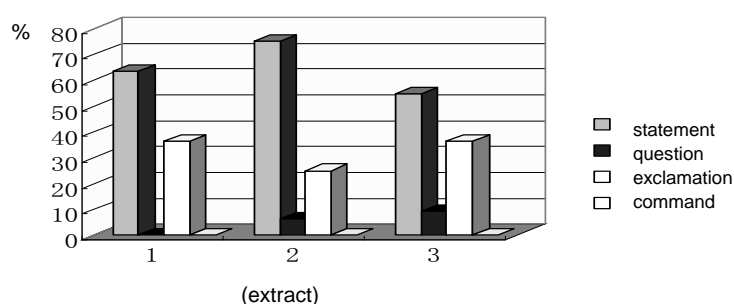
### Frequent use of exclamatory sentences

An exclamatory sentence is used to express a strong emotion. It begins with a capital letter and ends with an exclamation mark. Beside *What* and *How* exclamations, there are some other types [26]: 1) statement-type: "Mr. Golden is a musician!" "He thinks I am a good writer!"; 2) demand-type: "Good Lord!" "Tell me what it is!" and "Mind your head!"; 3) question-type: "Aren't they lovely!"; 4) clause-type: "If only you'd asked me earlier!"; 5) phrase-type: "Fancy that!"; and 6) word-type: "Splendid! Nonsense! Excellent!"

(49) *The Bulls' are the world champs again! Oh my word!*

**Table 9.** Sentence types

	Extract 1	Extract 2	Extract 3	Average
Total sentences	11	16	22	16.33
Statement	7	12	12	10.33
Percentage	63.67	75.0	54.54	63.25
Question	0	1	2	1
Percentage	0	6.25	9.09	6.12
Exclamation	4	4	8	5.33
Percentage	36.36	25.0	36.36	32.63
Command	0	0	0	0
Percentage	0	0	0	0



- (50) *The Bulls can win it right here!*  
(51) *Throw up, and good! Good! Incredible! Absolutely incredible!*  
(52) *Passes to Jordan!*  
(53) *Jordan a steal and dunk!*  
(54) *Oh, baby, what a sensational player!*  
(55) *Look at him fly!*  
(56) *The Bulls win it! They win it!*  
(57) *Three—pointer! In there!*  
(58) *Oh, my!*  
(59) *Jordan drives again and—*  
(60) *Michael Jordan!*  
(61) *Yeeow!*  
(62) *My god!*  
(63) *I don't believe it!*

The frequency of exclamatory sentences in NBA commentaries is very high. They are colorful and include all types of exclamation.

The greatest attractiveness of NBA games is that they make people excited with the tense atmosphere of a basketball game and skillful performance of players, which relieves people's life pressure and makes people relaxed thoroughly. The reason why the commentators like using exclamatory sentences is that they put themselves in the game and they share the players' happiness, excitement and depression. All of their feelings go with the ball, they are disappointed, cheerful, pitiful, tense, confident; they laugh, they cry on seeing what is happening on the court. Their commentaries captivate the audience and give it a kind of psychological satisfaction.

#### *Use of questions*

Most sentences used in the commentaries are of course statements; but questions do turn up occasionally. Therefore, they appear to be an important variety-marker. There are certain circumstances in which questions occur in the commentaries:

1) Where several commentators are covering an event or where there is a commentator plus someone else whose function is to advise or

summarize, the normal process of communication is bound to lead to questions:

(64) *Latrell Sprewell, Sprewell, gets it back. He shoots from the seat of his pants and scores! Seated at the free throw line. How many points you get for that?*

2) The example above may not be typical of character of commentaries; but there are often occasions, especially at moments of great tension, when it seems a characteristic habit of commentators to insert such questions as:

(65) *Michael has the rebound. Can he save it?*

3) There are also some questions that are not addressed to anyone, but convey the commentators' anticipation and identify them in inability to give the answer, with the audience:

(66) *And he's all right.*

*Michael, scores!*

*Jordan with the steal, and then it's stolen by Starks.*

*McDaniel—*

*It's a clean block.*

*Whose game is it?*

*It's Michael Jordan's game.*

4) At many moments, the commentators use questions to express their surprise on seeing an unbelievable act or a beautiful score etc.:

(67) *Oh! Did you see that?! Oh, my goodness! He missed a shot and it went way up higher than the clock. That is outstanding.*

(68) *Oh, my goodness! Can you believe it? That was as good as it gets, what a great pass and great finish.*

5) The commentators sometimes ask questions on purpose to add solicitude so as to arouse the audience's interest and attract more attention:

(69) *Michael Jordan!*

*How high can he get up? Oh, yes!*

*Here comes Mike!*

*That's why he is the best player in the game today.*

(70) *Michael Jordan, at his best, as very few people on this planet can do.*

*How does he do that?*

*What does he know?*

*Jordan!*

6) Sometimes the commentators, who employ some questions, aim at projecting focus beyond any



doubt to make their commentaries more appealing. They do not mean to ask for anyone else's answers:

(71) *Jordan fires another three. My god! I don't believe it!*

*Three-pointers from Jordan.*

*What in the world is going on?*

(72) *There's Jordan for three. Yes!*

*Did you see that look?*

*Michael can't believe it. This is the greatest performance may be ever in the history of the league.*

*Frequent use of loose grammatical linkage of sentences*

Commentators, like conversationalists, have to do most of their talking spontaneously, so it is not surprising that they frequently make use of loose grammatical linkages of sentences – especially with “and” – which is so common in conversational usage. This kind of linkage occurs along with prosodic indicators of coherence:

(73) *Malone, a cross court pass to Stockton with a three on the way, good! **And** Utah takes the lead.*

(74) *Malone in traffic, got his own and put it back in. **And** the spotlight was on two of the NBA's great leading men.*

(75) *Jordan! Malone duel shaping up in game six. Malone turn around shot on Rodman, Good! **And** there's his answer.*

(76) *We go to overtime. Our third overtime. **And** again, Michael Jordan comes up short.*

(77) *Michael has the rebound. Can he save it? He does! **And** he's all right.*

It can be noted that the commentators have a habit of marking *and* in its sentence-linking function. It is perhaps a habit of a speaker in conversation, but may be regarded as style marker of impromptu NBA commentaries, as it is a consequence of spontaneity. Crystal [5] also holds that this is probably idiosyncratic and may be evidence of a tendency to distinguish by prosodic means a frequently used element of discourse connection.

*Occasional grammatical discontinuities*

Another consequence of spontaneity is that there is always the likelihood of the occasional grammatical discontinuities that occur in conversation in impromptu NBA commentaries:

(78) *Jordan. Who has it on the break.*

*Driving all the way in...*

*Ya! Oh! Oh! Oh!*

*He's got it.*

(79) *Here come the Bulls again.*

*Michael...*

*Bounce pass,*

*Yes, he dropped it back.*

(80) *Jordan drives again and...*

*Michael Jordan! Yeeow!*

As the ball is the most important object in the game, catching everybody's eyes, the topic surrounding the ball is the focus of commentaries, and the commentators describe what is going on with the ball all the time, which makes it a cohesive key to the whole commentary. Therefore, the commentators utter such sentences in the form of grammatical discontinuities, which maybe an important style-marker.

However, it is questionable whether any audiences who know little about the rules of the NBA game and manners of commentaries are aware of the break. Of course, it is no problem for those dedicated NBA fans. Anyway, the ability to accommodate a smooth flow of speech is no doubt characteristic of a skilled commentator.

*Occasional stammers*

In impromptu NBA commentaries, there are some features quite different from other styles such as utterance like “**T**this game is over!”, “**H**he's put it in, and it counts!” “**H**he's everywhere” and so on, which would not be tolerable in any forms of written or spoken English. This kind of language forms appears only on informal occasions like in daily conversation. However, the NBA game is so attractive that commentators tend to put themselves on the court like the players. They are excited, anxious and cheerful like the audience, so they are not able to avoid occasional stammering.

## LINGUISTIC FEATURES AT THE SEMANTIC LEVEL

### *Precise meaning*

At the semantic level, the style of impromptu NBA commentaries is quite different from spoken language, where speakers often do not say what they want to deliver directly, but express it in an indirect way and obey the cooperative principle or violate it deliberately. It is similar to the language of science. However, it shows its own particular features as a style-marker.

One of linguistic features at the semantic level is that NBA commentaries are precise, conveying what the commentators really mean to say without any confusion. The commentators employ simple and plain language. It is descriptive, explaining to the audience the sights, the sounds, and the smells of the event. It is suited in pace and in tone to what is happening on the court – lively for an exciting game, cheering for every score, somber for the reflections of every miss. This means that the language of commentaries must be accurate and clear, simple and vivid, and unambiguous.

The use of deixis, which also reflects ambiguous meaning, is not tolerable in this style. When referring to a player or a certain place, the commentators never use confusing deixis like “*he*”, “*this*”, “*that*”, “*there*” and so on, because practical information cannot be provided if they do so. Even if those words are used, the commentators will make further explanations, e.g.:

(81) *Michael, inform the left side,  
jammed it right over rolling,  
Michael Jordan!.....*

(82) *Jordan into the back court, in on Milt Wagner,  
dunk!*

*What a dunk by Michael!  
There's Dale Ellis off to the right!*

(83) *Wide left, Pippen. 3 seconds!  
Jordan's force up shot from the left-  
Oh, yes!  
Michael Jordan saves the day!*

Precise description, especially on site, is often given as in *the left side* (81), *the back court* (82), *from the left* (83). When the commentators refer to some player, they avoid using the pronoun “*he*”, but use the name of the player to avoid possible confusion:

(84) *To Harper. Harper on the run.*

(85) *Lead pass, Toni...|Kukoc to Michael.*

In (84), the commentator refers to “*Harper*” twice instead of using “*he*”, and provides detailed and exact information to the audience.

### *Rhetorical devices*

Impromptu NBA commentaries primarily provide information about events. Their language is likely to be factual and non-figurative or without rhetorical devices; but the NBA commentators are also expected to give an adequate visual impression of the events and of their setting, and this gives them the opportunity to be descriptive and impressionistic.

Because sport has such a central place in our society, it is not surprising that it lends so many metaphors to our everyday language. These metaphors also help to reflect and reinforce a social and economic system based on competition, winners and losers. For instance, animal metaphors and verbal expressions associated with fierce animals (e.g. ‘*swallow*’, ‘*roar*’, ‘*snatch*’, ‘*bite*’) – are also frequently used to highlight the violent aspects of NBA games. More importantly, since sports, like wars, is a matter of winning and losing, it is no coincidence that war metaphors (e.g. ‘*attack*’, ‘*kill*’, ‘*ambush*’, ‘*occupy*’) are pervasive in impromptu NBA commentaries. Some other rhetorical devices are used to add language charm to the commentaries:

(86) *It was a bullet pass.*

(87) *He dropped it back to Scottie. That's the nail,  
baby.*

(88) *And back come the Bulls. Pippen. Oh, he is  
ripped. This has become a war.*

(89) *And what a quite crowd all of a sudden. All  
those plans for the parade, for the victory  
celebration, for the awarding of the trophy, out the  
window, baby! We're going to Salt Lake City.*

The examples above show the uses of hyperbole (86), analogy (87) and (88), and parallelism in (89).

Rhetorical devices can no doubt add freshness, vividness and force to the language of a commentary. In order to obtain this good effect, the commentators often get the utterances beautified by using all kinds of rhetorical techniques. For example, hyperbole, analogy, and parallelism are

often used, which can strengthen the mood, beautify language and add force. They can also make presentation clear and distinct when they are used for narrating and describing, and they make speech attractive and exciting when used for speaking. They can convey all kinds of mixed feelings.

### LINGUISTIC FEATURES AT THE TEXTUAL LEVEL

#### *Loose organization*

The textual structure of impromptu NBA commentaries is very loose, even broken and disturbed, because the game is always changing and unpredictable. The commentators often connect those unrelated sentences loosely with “and”. As the game is unexpected, the climax of the game suddenly occurs when the commentators are delivering information about the state of the game and make descriptions of background details as there is no noticeable activity, at this moment the commentators have to stop commenting or introducing to move on the description of what is happening on the court. Sometimes, the commentators would keep previous comments or introduction after the climax. It is certain that the textual structure is broken, but it is fairly regular and will not affect the audience’s understanding, because what the audience is interested in is the game, and whether the textual structure is well-organized or not is not important for them. This is not tolerable in any style apart from daily conversation.

#### *Sequential structuring*

If impromptu NBA commentaries are to be considered a language style, their textual structure should be mentioned, too. The most salient point is that it is mainly structured in sequential order, which is the need and limitation of impromptu commenting. But it is not always sequential, for instance, when an action is not centrally important to the game, the description of the action, as a means of filling time and creating an atmosphere, is often inserted.

#### *Entertaining color*

It has been long recognized that language is an essential and important part of a given culture,

and the impact of culture upon a given language is something intrinsic and indispensable. Studying language in its socio-cultural context is exactly what many modern linguists advocate. NBA commentaries, which bear entertaining color and influence people’s views and feelings about sport, inevitably embody the cultural and social reality.

People are eager to get some physical and mental relaxation after hard work; they can experience this feeling in a hysterical or barbarous way. The NBA game is the very sport that can satisfy people. The commentators announce the event in a barbarous way, they release all kinds of feelings standing for the players and the audience as much as they like; and they convey excitement and hysteria with appropriate phonological effects. Anybody will be attracted and influenced deeply as soon as he has ever heard a good commentary, and meanwhile he will be entirely relieved from pressure of life and work. Therefore, it can be said that impromptu NBA commentaries are worth appreciating because of their entertaining color. Enjoying listening to commentaries is as exciting as enjoying NBA games themselves.

### CONCLUSION

A systematic and quantitative analysis of impromptu NBA commentaries reveals some striking linguistic features and rules at various levels: phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic and textual, which are determined by the register of this style. The major findings are listed as follows:

Impromptu NBA commentaries possess distinctive prosodic features like stress, tempo, pause, length and loudness, which greatly contribute to the expression of meaning. The NBA commentators often employ prosodic features to create excitement for listeners, which promptly reflects the glamour of this language.

At the lexical level, impromptu NBA commentaries feature simple structuring words, low lexical density, and frequent use of proper nouns and verbs. Because the NBA game is a specialist sport, NBA commentators tend to use technical terms and sports jargons. There are also numerous occurrences of phrase repetition, but due to time pressure, unlike in spoken language, there are no fillers in the language of the commentaries.

The average sentence length in NBA commentaries is far less than that of daily conversation. Commentators like using minor sentences and

loose grammatical sentence linkages. Exclamatory sentences are often used to express strong emotions like astonishment or extreme exclamations. NBA commentators occasionally utter some incomplete sentences and ungrammatical sentences; occasional stammers also occur. Since the NBA commentaries are simultaneous, the simple present tense is mainly used.

On the semantic level, impromptu NBA commentaries are precise and their language is simple and plain. Although the language of NBA is descriptive, the commentators still employ rhetorical devices to add expressing effects. In terms of organizational patterns, the textual structure of NBA commentaries is very loose, broken and disturbed, but it has a sequential structure and entertaining color.

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