

The Language of Live Sports: A Discourse Analysis of Football Commentary

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Abstract

Live commentary of football is one of the unique forms of spoken language. It is driven by the fact that there is always a lot of time pressure, the game flow is not predictable and the audience's immediate expectations. This style, unlike scripted media, is based heavily on quick thinking and a shared cultural background between the commentator and the viewer. This study explores televised football commentary to understand how the certain linguistic selections, sharing of turns between multiple commentators and visual representations interact to make meaning in the context of a live broadcast. Following a qualitative approach, we examine one of the samples of commentary from major international matches. Among the features analyzed are dropped words (ellipsis), evaluative language, and metaphors and the way commentators cope with time restrictions. We have observed that commentators make use of brief and efficient phrasing and visual context to sustain their narrative despite significant pressure. The study illuminates the processes of sports broadcasting, enlarging the current body of knowledge of the spoken language in fast paced media environments.

Keywords: Football Commentary; Discourse Analysis; Sports Media; Spoken Discourse; Real-Time Communication.

لغة البث الرياضي المباشر: تحليل خطابي للتعليق الكروي
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المخلص

تتميز التعليقات الرياضية المباشرة لمباريات كرة القدم بكونها أسلوباً لغوياً منطوقاً متميزاً؛ إذ يفرض عليها ضيق الوقت الشديد، والتدفق غير المتوقع لمجريات اللعبة، والتوقعات الفورية للجمهور طابعاً خاصاً. وبخلاف المواد الإعلامية المكتوبة مسبقاً، يعتمد هذا الأسلوب بشكل كبير على سرعة البديهة والخلفية الثقافية المشتركة بين المعلق والمشاهد. تبحث هذه الدراسة في التعليقات التلفزيونية لمباريات كرة القدم لتوضيح كيف تتضافر الاختيارات اللغوية المحددة، وتبادل الأدوار بين عدة معلقين، والإشارات البصرية معاً لبناء المعنى أثناء البث المباشر. ومن خلال تبني إطار عمل نوعي (وصفي)، نتناول عينة من التعليقات المأخوذة من مباريات دولية كبرى. ويركز التحليل على سمات مثل الكلمات المحذوفة (الإيجاز)، واللغة التقييمية، والاستعارات المجازية، وكيفية تعامل المعلقين مع قيود الوقت. وتشير ملاحظتنا إلى أن المعلقين يعتمدون على صياغة عبارات قصيرة وفعالة مستعينين بالسياق البصري لمواصلة سردهم للأحداث تحت الضغط الشديد. تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على آلية عمل البث الرياضي، مما يساهم في توسيع الدراسات والأدبيات الحالية المتعلقة باللغة المنطوقة في البيئات الإعلامية متسارعة الوتيرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تحليل الخطاب؛ التعليق الرياضي؛ الخطاب الشفهي؛ الإعلام الرياضي؛ التواصل الفوري

1. Introduction

The modern world culture is based on competitive sporting activities and football is generally considered as the most popular sporting activity in the world (Beard, 1998). It is not a hobby anymore, it is a colossal international business which involves serious financial investments, social energy and political attention. The outcomes of the matches may influence the stock price, the brand image, and the future of high-end clubs in the long term (McKay, 2018). In such a fast-paced landscape, media professionals and live commentators do much more than simply narrating what is unfolding on the pitch (Fairclough, 1995).

They create the narrative of the game. They provide tactical insight and emotional framing in real-time to transform the raw athletic effort into a dramatic narrative that makes sense to the viewer. The viewing experience would be deprived of its main emotional connection without their voice. Commentators aid the audience to comprehend minor technical adjustments and tactical abilities (Ferguson, 1983). Without this audio guide, a live broadcast would feel hollow: it would be empty without tension and depth that contemporary sports fans are accustomed to.

Due to the uniqueness of sports language, it has become an attraction among linguists (Clayman, 1992). Nevertheless, the existing studies concentrate a lot on written print journalism or non-English broadcasts (Gerhardt, 2008). This paper is specifically concerned with the spontaneous, spoken English applied in live commenting of football games on the major media networks. We consider the interplay of word selection, instant context and real time storytelling through discourse analysis as they combine to form a live television broadcast (Drew and Heritage, 1992).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The early studies in linguistics tended to underrate sports language as basic or repetitive. However, in reality, one of the most mentally demanding spoken language is live football commentary (Biber et al., 1999). Working within hard time constraints, commentators are immediately turning unpredictably visual action to coherent and smooth narrative with no chance to edit or rewrite (Chafe, 1982). Nevertheless, even with this complexity, the specifics of live commentary are under-studied in English linguistics. Conventional models usually view the genre as a relatively simple, play-by-play description of physical movement (Phillips, 1970; Balzer-Siber, 2015).

To investigate how this professional practice is systematically structured, this study addresses three main questions:

1. Which structural and language characteristics are most frequent in commentary in live matches?



2.What happens when something on the pitch surprises the commentators and they have to make changes on the fly in their phrasing and meaning?

3.What effect does the wider broadcasting context have on the decision made by a commentator when they are not looking at the action at hand?

1.2 Aims of the Study

The main goal of the research is to dissect and map language of live football commentary and consider it as a professional and intentional skill. With this aim, the paper is dedicated to five particular goals:

1.To determine and classify the key language strategies adopted by commentators when they are doing top-level international broadcasts.

2.Mapping quick mental adjustments enabling commentators to maintain coherence in tight time limits.

3.Assessing the impacts regarding opinion-marking as well as evaluative language on the viewer's perception about the match.

4.Analyzing the way subtle lexical decisions are utilized for making audio stream sound seamless.

5.To show how the communication codes in contemporary sports media can be unpacked with the use of qualitative discourse analysis.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The paper is at the intersection of discourse analysis and sports linguistics. Although the language of politics, classrooms, and conventional journalism has received significant attention, little has been done to study live sports commentary (Schiffrin, 1994). The paper fills this gap in the academic literature by considering live match commentary a sophisticated, regulated form of spoken professional language, which is deserving of intensive academic analysis (Drew and Heritage, 1992).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Discourse Analysis and Spoken Discourse

The concept of discourse analysis views language as a practical and social action. It goes beyond the fundamental rules of sentence grammar to examine the construction of meaning by context and real life communication (Schiffrin, 1994). Initial studies in this area revealed that words and sentences do not work in isolation but they interact with each other in networks to produce a unified, logical text (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). Researchers have to work under the conditions unavailable in writing when studying spoken language, such as insufficient time to plan and the necessity for immediate delivery.

Spoken communication is dependent on physical context, time indicators and tonal alteration to communicate information in a fast manner (Biber et al., 1999). With such a speed of requirements, such features as dropped words (ellipsis), repetitive phrases, and self-corrections occur naturally.

They are not mistakes, but useful tools that are used to regulate speech in the moment (Chafe, 1982). Spoken meaning is flexible and it changes according to



the instant situation but not according to a rigid set of grammar in a written form (Schiffrin, 1994).

2.2 Sports Discourse and Media Communication

The sports discourse occupies one of the central places in the contemporary mass media due to the great rates of consumption and the unique possibility to establish the emotional investment in the world as a collective phenomenon.

The critical media research proves that linguistic expression of the athletic competition cannot be a transparent and objective vision of physical movement. Instead, the media apparatuses positively design specific modes of cognition, organize ideological narratives and control the perception of the viewers through purposeful lexical and structural arrangements (Fairclough, 1995).

More recent approaches to sports linguistics contain the notion that live commentary is a multi-modal, highly performative genre and not a factual log. The commentators have always found themselves at cross roads of whether to be quick, spontaneous in the narration or to meet the requirements of entertainment, culture values and involvement of emotions. This complex communicative structure is influenced by three basic dynamics lingual characteristics, rhetorical systems and contextual configurations.

First, the linguistic architecture is founded on a rapid register that is tailored to compressing the rapid-actions into vivid images to the listener. This is expressed in a number of different strategies:

Clause Fragmentation: The abrupt bursts of action are reflected by short and incomplete phrases (such as What a strike!).

Heavy Modification: Adding as many descriptive adjectives and adverbs as possible to provide the maximum dramatic effect.

Syntactic Inversion: To cause focus and tension, the usual order of words is changed (e.g., "Up steps the captain").

Discourse Deixis and Ellipsis: It is losing structural words or relying on situational pronouns (He's in!), in order to maintain high-speed gameplay without losing the listener.

Second, broadcasters use several rhetorical elements and pragmatic acts for securing the attention of the audience. This involves the presentation of the football games in terms of war, battle or journeys (e.g., a fierce midfield battle). Clear appraisal strategies are also used by commentators to assess player performance and match importance in real time. In international broadcasts, multilingual commentators tend to utilize code-switching, i.e. mixing English with Spanish, Arabic or French in moments of high stakes such as goals, to reach a wide international audience immediately.

Lastly, the context of this style of media discourse is greatly influenced by the immediate situation in which the context can be explained by the framework of field (the match), tenor (the relation between the speakers and the audience) and mode (the channel of the spoken media). Broadcasters incorporate what is

referred to as synthetic addressivity to overcome the physical distance between the study room and living room.

They directly address the large home audience in a manner that it feels like direct conversation and shared community experience. This is supported by the inherent co-commentator relationship on the screen where constant interplay between play-by-play announcer and a specialist analyst creates a seamless, collaborative conversation (Drew and Heritage, 1992).

2.3 Limitations in Existing Sports Linguistics Literature

Even though sports broadcasting is a popular field, the linguistic studies of live football commentary are significantly few. An overview of the existing literature shows that whereas cross-cultural research has tended to comment on the societal status of sports media, it typically addresses the print journalism or edited texts but not spontaneous live speech (Ferguson, 1983; Beard, 1998).

In cases where scholars actually research television commentary, they frequently approach the task as predictable, mechanistic account of actions on the field (Phillips, 1970; Gerhardt, 2008; Balzer-Siber, 2015). This perspective lacks the adaptable tactics, rapid adjustments and conversational abilities that commentators make to manage an unpredictable live game (Clayman, 1992). Past research has mostly overlooked the way spoken grammar adapts when time is a heavy constraint by disregarding these live demands.

2.4 Football Commentary as Institutional Discourse

Although sports broadcasting is popular, in-depth linguistic studies of live commentary of football are conspicuously few. An examination of existing literature reveals that existing studies on cross-cultural studies tend to address the social role of sports media but in most cases, they address the role of print journalism or edited texts instead of spontaneous live speech (Ferguson, 1983; Beard, 1998).

Researchers who study television commentary have also tended to regard it as a mechanical and predictable description of actions on the field (Phillips, 1970; Gerhardt, 2008; Balzer-Siber, 2015). This perspective lacks the adaptive strategies, fast adaptation, and conversational skills that commentators employ to cope with an unpredictable live match (Clayman, 1992). By not paying attention to these live demands, previous studies have mostly overlooked the adaptive characteristic of spoken grammar under heavy time constraint.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research takes an interpretive, qualitative discourse-analytic design to examine the situated, contextualized qualities of language use in live football broadcasts. In line with the qualitative inquiry, the analytical focus is placed on uncovering pragmatic functions, following the institutional contexts, and revealing the systems of meaning formation underlying it, as opposed to monitoring the raw statistical distributions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

The linguistic coding, to ensure the needed empirical rigor of the advanced sports linguistics, works with a synergistic framework: structural ellipsis and deictic reference are analyzed via the system of textual cohesion created by Halliday and Hasan (1976), with the evaluative stance-taking analyzed through the lens of the Appraisal Theory developed by Martin and White (2005). This two-sided model maintains the naturalistic characteristics of spoken data, and live commentary is viewed as integrated, organic communicative action that is influenced by its immediate context (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

3.2 Data Collection and Corpus Description

This research relies on the empirical basis of systematically compiled 20 different segments of televised international football broadcasts based on premier international tournaments, such as the FIFA World Cup, the UEFA Champions League, the UEFA Euro championship, 2022-2024 (McKay, 2018). All the separate discourse elements, as described in the Appendix, represent about 10 to 15 minutes of continuous broadcast delivery, balancing the data across a variety of, high-velocity match circumstances.

These checkpoints were specifically selected to capture fluid tactical changes, unstable refereeing decisions and high scoring and defensive periods of a match. As a means of protecting the dataset against cross-linguistic differences and to maintain strict structural homogeneity, the corpus isolates official English-language feeds only, producing an end-result analytical dataset of about 10,000 words of natural and spontaneous spoken commentary.

3.3 Transcription Protocol

In order to ensure the empirical accuracy, the audio of the chosen broadcasts was rendered manually into text. Transcription tracked explicit words and significant aspects of speech, such as pauses, extended syllables, rapid self-corrections and pitch changes, were recorded as per the usual conversation analysis styles (Jefferson, 2004). The stadium background modifications such as the ambient crowd noise, and cheers were also recorded together in the transcripts in order to maintain the context of the commentary (Drew and Heritage, 1992).

3.4 Ethical Considerations

This research project established ethical principles of academic research. The dataset was created based on the publicly available, non-proprietary broadcasts of media only and no intrusion was made into private information. The research ensures high standards of academic integrity by credibly citing previous studies and transcribing the verbal data with caution (American Psychological Association, 2020).

4. Data Analysis and Findings

4.1 Ellipsis and Syntactic Reduction

A close examination of the dataset shows a pervasive, widespread use of ellipsis and extreme syntactic economy that peaks very high in times of on-field

intensity. When the match action speeds up, an adaptive default of commentators is to omit the subjects, auxiliary verbs and direct objects.

A case in point is when a counter-attack was made in the Champions League (Segment S01), the commentator said: Back to midfield--intercepted! This sentence is linguistically devoid of the subject of the noun phrase and its passive auxiliary ("The ball has been intercepted"). The statement is perfectly readable in spite of this radical cut. The audience of the television immediately decodes the syntax that is missing by combining the bare acoustic signal with the synchronous visual broadcast.

It is a highly productive form of linguistic economy, which helps the speaker capture the physical speed of the match, and a continuous flow of narration (Chafe, 1982; Halliday and Hasan, 1976). Similarly in the World Cup Final text (Segment S05) the fast defensive clearances smashed entire clauses into short, action oriented phrasal bursts like "Cross in--cleared!".

These severely reduced patterns reveal that under extreme real time pressures the traditional rules of grammar are readily abandoned in favor of more adaptable, pragmatically constrained oral structures that are optimized for immediate cognitive processing (Biber et al., 1999).

4.2 Evaluative Language and Stance-Taking

Further than neutral, detached reporting, the commentary in the dataset is saturated with evaluative vocabulary that are meant to influence the perception of the spectators and increase emotional involvement. This evaluative behavior was found to have four main manifestations as identified by the qualitative analysis:

-Adjectives and Adverbs: The lexically dense terms are strategically used to give value and grade player performance in real-time (McKay, 2018). Taking the example of Segment S12, the main defense error was named a "catastrophic lapse of concentration", and the moment the match had become more serious to the listener.

Affective Interjections: Raw oral outbursts (e.g., oh! wow! yes) that do not use formal syntax for projecting unmediated excitement, shock, or relief, are common in near-miss situations, such as in Segment S06.

-Metaphorical Expressions: The use of vivid conceptual structures. In Segment S14, the commentator in charge referred to a pass by a midfielder by saying: "He cuts through the defense like a surgeon". The use of these harsh martial and professional images redefines the regular spatial positioning into a dramatic narrative of conflict and dominance (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

-Epistemic Modality: Use of modal verbs and phrases (e.g., might score, could have been, surely, he knew) to move between pure reporting and interpretive, analytical speculation about how a manager made tactical choices (Segment S10).

4.3 Temporal Compression

Temporal compression is the term describing the fast structural adaptations of speakers to maintain the constant speech in step with the flashing visual inputs. The corpus shows a heavy use of immediate deictic temporal markers (e.g., now, again, straight away, instantly) in order to locate the auditory stream directly to immediate split second. In fast transitions within the penalty box (measured by Segment S11), the traditional conjunctions are replaced by direct narrative sequencing:

“Ball passed—shot—saved—corner!”

This very condensed syntactic structure deprives all standard coordinators, condensing several independent processes into singular, faster, verbal process. This tendency is an example of how the physical pressures of operations in the real-time affects the spoken grammar in the media institutions at the expense of the traditional syntax to meet the demands of the consumer to have the immediate narrative synchronization (Chafe, 1982; Ferguson, 1983).

4.4 Turn-Taking and Coordination

Our multi-commentator structure analysis reveals a very disciplined and complementary interactional structure. The spoken text is structured in an institutionalized manner: Commentator 1 (the play-by-play announcer) takes control of the turn-taking to give high speed description, whereas Commentator 2 (the expert analyst) comes in at natural pauses and provides deep tactical analysis (Gerhardt, 2008).

The turn-taking systems are highly synchronized as they are based on quick conversational latching and cooperative overlapping which strengthen conversational continuity and not to break it. A good case in point was a critical VAR ruling in Segment S15:

Commentator 1: “He passes to the wing—oh, nearly a cross!”

Commentator 2: [Latching] “Yes, but the defense is well positioned.”

A high level of interactional scaffolding can be seen in such fluid transition. The two broadcasters would be synchronized narrative team that would deploy a localized alignment strategies to determine a continuous, professional delivery regarding information to home viewers (Drew and Heritage, 1992; Jefferson, 2004).

4.5 Deixis and Contextual Inference

Using deictic expressions was interwoven into the majority of research corpus levels. The temporal (now), spatial (here, there), and demonstrative (this player, that challenge) deictic indicators are kept in constant use by broadcasters. Dependence below is represented in Segment S19:

"He goes there, looking for this pass..."

This sentence lacks independent semantic meaning, not coupled with common visual background of the broadcast. This is an effective cognitive shortcut in the context of the live media broadcasting. Replacing long, explicit accounts with spatial as well as demonstrative pointers reduces real time cognitive load regarding the speaker, also maximizes the narrative speed, taking advantage of the fact that audience can draw instant contextual inferences (Schiffrin, 1994).

4.6 Summary of Analytical Findings

The empirical evidence indicates that live football commentary is extremely fluent register of spoken professional language. A combination of these basic language strategies combined synthesized in Table 1 helps it maintain its flow within narrow time limits (Halliday and Hasan, 1976; Drew and Heritage, 1992; Schiffrin, 1994; McKay, 2018).

Table 1: Summary of Discourse Categories and Communicative Functions

Core Linguistic Strategy	Discourse Category
Omission of subjects, objects, and auxiliary verbs	Ellipsis and Reduction
Dense adjectives, metaphors, and interjections	Evaluative Language
Deletion of conjunctions; rapid verbal sequencing	Temporal Compression
Role specialization, latching, and cooperative overlaps	Turn-Taking Coordination
Heavy reliance on spatial and demonstrative markers	Deictic Reference

5. Discussion

Synthesizing these results shows that live football commentary is more than literal description regarding physical actions on field- reductionist viewpoint at times promoted in older sports linguistics literature (Phillips, 1970; Gerhardt, 2008; Balzer-Siber, 2015), yet, such form of speech is extremely strategic and intentional.

The high frequency of ellipsis, syntactic shortening and deictic signs do not signify cognitive disfluency and lexicon difficulty. On the contrary, they are practical, functional choices, which are meant to beat the temporal constraints of the live television production (Chafe, 1982; Biber et al., 1999).

The statistics highlight the fine balance which commentators are in between two fundamental institutional requirements regarding factual reportage as well as dramatic entertainment (Fairclough, 1995). Evaluative framing and spatial metaphors are not a mere stylistic embellishment. They are critical semiotic tools which are utilized for converting raw athletic data into compelling narrative, to make a physical contest a common cultural phenomenon (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; McKay, 2018).



This dynamic is also confirmed by such a smooth coordination of multi-commentator combinations as it demonstrates how broadcasters can take advantage of collaborative turn taking in order to maintain coherence in an unpredictable match course (Drew and Heritage, 1992). Finally, syntax, context, and pragmatic meaning interaction show sports commentary is a very organized, professional communicative practice (Schiffrin, 1994).

6. Conclusions

This paper provides an empirically based, qualitative discourse analysis regarding live football commentary and contextualizes it as a very specialized branch of the institutional spoken language. This research provides insight into the higher order cognitive as well as practical skills that entail the broadcasting of high stakes sporting occasions by examining how commentators adapt the language in real-time context. Within the framework of the qualitative analysis of the research corpus, the following far-reaching conclusions of the study are drawn:

-Syntactic Economy and Adaptation: Extreme ellipsis, syntactic reduction and quick sequencing are systematically used in football commentary to deal with strict real-time requirements. These structural reductions are not a speech error, or a grammatical inadequacy, but, in fact, a very efficient linguistic shortcut. They enable the broadcaster to keep up with the physical pace of the game and still retain the overall textual coherence and confuse the viewer (Halliday and Hasan, 1976; Chafe, 1982).

-The Power of Evaluative Framing: Evaluative terms, vivid adjectives, conceptual metaphors are not decorations, but are crucial elements of narration. These devices are employed by commentators to construct dramatic arcs actively of raw match data to influence the interpretation of on-field action, player actions, and referee decisions and ensure a more significant emotional engagement on the part of the home viewer (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; McKay, 2018).

-Interactional Scaffolding: Multi-commentator formats are based on very structured, collaborative turn taking systems and strict division of roles to ensure the constant stream of broadcast. This collaborative narrative framework can be achieved through the synchronized interplay of the play-by-play announcer and the expert analyst. They are able to do this by accurately latching and providing supporting overlaps to ensure professional fluency in case of unexpected on-field crises (Drew and Heritage, 1992; Gerhardt, 2008).

-Visual Interdependence and Deixis:

The deictic references are necessary linguistic shortcuts, transferring the explicit description task to the visual field of the viewer through quick inferential processing. Through the common visual frame of the screen, commentators can employ basic spatial and demonstrative pointers to decrease the cognitive load, maximize speaking speed, and to generate sense of direct conversational intimacy with global audience (Schiffrin, 1994).

-Performative and Multi-Modal Nature: Fundamentally, live sports media discourse is neither a passive nor objective log of physical activity. It is a very performative and multi-modal genre in which language, immediate context and



visual cues are highly intertwined. The broadcaster does not merely report the match, they actively construct it into a comprehensible cultural spectacle, demonstrating that spontaneous sports commentary is a highly disciplined, rule-based communicative practice in the contemporary media institutions.

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Appendix: Corpus Description and Data Sources

This appendix provides a detailed inventory of the 20 separate segments used in the research corpus. Each segment consists of 10 to 15 minutes of uninterrupted, spontaneous English-language commentary.



Broadcast Network Feed	Season/Year	Tournament/League	Match/Teams Involved	Segment ID
UEFA Official Feed	2023/2024	UEFA Champions League	Real Madrid vs. Manchester City	S01
TNT Sports	2023/2024	UEFA Champions League	Arsenal vs. Bayern Munich	S02
CBS Sports	2023/2024	UEFA Champions League	Paris Saint-Germain vs. Barcelona	S03
BT Sport	2022/2023	UEFA Champions League Final	Manchester City vs. Inter Milan	S04
FIFA World Cup Official	2022	FIFA World Cup Final	Argentina vs. France	S05
ITV Football	2022	FIFA World Cup Quarter- Final	England vs. France	S06
BBC Sport	2022	FIFA World Cup Quarter- Final	Croatia vs. Brazil	S07
RTE Sport	2022	FIFA World Cup Quarter- Final	Netherlands vs. Argentina	S08
Sky Sports	2023/2024	League Cup Final	Liverpool vs. Chelsea	S09
ITV Football	2023/2024	FA Cup Quarter- Final	Manchester United vs. Liverpool	S10
TNT Sports	2023/2024	UEFA Champions League Final	Real Madrid vs. Borussia Dortmund	S11
Sky Sports	2023/2024	English Premier League	Manchester City vs. Arsenal	S12
Super Sport	2023/2024	English Premier League	Liverpool vs. Manchester City	S13
BBC Sport	2024	UEFA Euro Final	Spain vs. England	S14
ITV Football	2024	UEFA Euro Semi- Final	Netherlands vs. England	S15
UEFA Official Feed	2024	UEFA Euro Quarter -Final	Spain vs. Germany	S16
CBS Sports	2023/2024	UEFA Champions League	Inter Milan vs. Atletico Madrid	S17
TNT Sports	2023/2024	UEFA Champions League	Borussia Dortmund vs. PSG	S18
Sky Sports	2023/2024	English Premier League	Arsenal vs. Manchester United	S19
Premier League productions	2023/2024	English Premier League	Chelsea vs. Tottenham Hotspur	S20