Iniesta passed and Messi finished clinically: Football verbs and transitivity

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Abstract

Football language, like other special languages, is not only of lexical interest. It is also special by virtue of various syntactic and semantic features, related to the situational context of football. Two areas of verb syntax, involving transitivity, are in focus: the omissibility of certain contextually recoverable "football objects" (e.g. *Iniesta passed [the ball]*, *Messi finished [the attack]*) and the occurrence of "unconventional" objects of certain verbs (e.g. *Their third goal killed the match*, *Manchester United sold Ronaldo to Real Madrid*). Thus, like other special subject areas, football creates its own semantic-pragmatic framework, paving the way for constructions and collocations that deviate from those applying in general language.

Keywords: football language, transitivity, omitted objects, unconventional objects, expressive economy, selectional restrictions

1. Introduction

Football, or soccer, has long been the most popular and widespread sport on earth, variously referred to as the "people's game" and the "world's game" (e.g. Walvin 1994, Murray 1996, Harvey 2005). Its global status, in minds and media, extends far beyond the world of sports – it is also a mass and pop cultural phenomenon of rare proportions.[1] This implies that football language, broadly defined as the repertoire of expressive means and registers used for communicating about football, is arguably the world's biggest "special language" (cf. Sager et al. 1981:63ff.). At the same time, due to the vast number of people interested in football worldwide (cf. Goldblatt 2007:x), media coverage, etc., it may be considered, to a considerable extent, a public language, thus part of

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[1] Cf. Goldblatt's (2007:x) rhetorical question: "Is there any cultural practice more global than football?"

"general language".[2] In this article, however, our main focus is on the specialness of football language, relating to certain aspects of its verb syntax.[3]

To be sure, special languages are perceived as such mainly owing to their technical vocabulary (Sager et al. 1981:230), football language being no exception (cf. terms like *sidefoot*, *offside*, *one-two* and *set piece*): "[t]he language of football is first and foremost terminology" (Lavric 2008:5). However, special languages may also exhibit characteristic grammatical features, e.g. with regard to article usage, nominalisations, etc., usually less conspicuous than special terminology.

One typical feature of football language relates to verb usage. The example in the title provides two instances of this: the use of the verbs *pass* and *finish*. First of all, we may note that for someone totally unfamiliar with football language, even the basic meaning of the example sentence, i.e. a goal being scored, would likely be shrouded in mystery. At the lexical level, both *pass* and *finish* have special "football" meanings (enhanced by the seemingly odd collocation *finished clinically*), distinguishing them from general language, in itself a demonstration of the specialness of football language; this, of course, is not unique to *pass* and *finish*.[4] Syntactically, the verbs in question behave in a no less special way, related to their lexical properties. In the example sentence, the verb *pass* has, as it were, an implicitly transitive function. Contrary to the "normal" intransitive use of *pass*, it does not mean that Iniesta just walked or ran by, but that he delivered the ball from a certain distance, by kicking it, to Messi. The ball, however, is not mentioned,

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[2] For discussion of the relations between football language, sports language and general language, see Bergh & Ohlander (2012a:14ff.). Cf. also Beard (1998), Svensén (2009:71f.) and Sager et al. (1981:68): "There is no absolute borderline between general and special language".

[3] In comparison with the plethora of academic studies on historical, sociological and cultural aspects of football (cf. Russell 1997:1f.), the language of the game may be described as under-researched (Lavric 2008:5). On the other hand, there are several books (e.g. Leith 1997, Seddon 2004) dealing with "football talk", "footballese", "soccerese", etc., from a popular cultural rather than linguistic perpective, often with a focus on jargon and clichés (cf. also Morris 1981:298ff.), but certainly testifying to the public interest in some noticeable features of, e.g., football commentary and match reports.

[4] Another well-known example of verbs taking on special "football" meanings is *dive* in the rough sense of 'fall to the ground, pretending to have been fouled', as in *Diving is one of the biggest problems in today's football*.

only contextually implied, like Messi, the recipient of the pass (cf. *Iniesta passed the ball to Messi*). Similarly, the verb *finish*, normally a transitive verb, appears to lack an object while, nonetheless, referring to an act of goal scoring by Messi. In this case, the "understood" or "missing" object is not *the ball* (cf. **Messi finished the ball*), but rather something more vague or abstract, such as *the attack*.[5]

Object omission, however, is not the only special verb usage to be found in football language. There are other types of special or "unconventional" verb behaviour related to transitivity, often involving violation of "normal" selectional constraints, as illustrated in expressions such as *kill the match* and *rest a player*. Such verb usage will also be dealt with in due course.

Although our principal focus will be on English, we shall have occasion to consider some relevant examples of parallel usage concerning Swedish football verbs; for instance, the title example translates literally into perfectly idiomatic "football Swedish": *Iniesta passade och Messi avslutade kliniskt*. It should be added that far from all of the special verb usage discussed in the following pages is exclusive to football language. In fact, similar usage may be found in other types of sports language, especially – but not only – in other ball sports (cf. Bergh & Ohlander 2012a:16f.).

Before we go on to consider verb usage in football language in some more depth, something should be said about the notion of transitivity in so far as it relates to our further discussion of certain football verbs.

2. Transitive and intransitive verb use

The traditional distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs, closely related to notions such as complementation and valency, lies at the very core of English verb syntax. In the words of Quirk et al. (1985:53), transitive verbs "are followed by an object", as in *Iniesta passed the ball*, whereas intransitive verbs "are followed by no

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[5] The examples used in this study are for the most part edited examples from extensive web searches. For example, the verb *pass*, used intransitively with an omitted object (*ball*), occurs (among thousands of others) in the following examples: *... just stood there and watched as Iniesta passed to Messi, Iniesta passed the ball to Messi on the edge of the box;* cf. also *Messi finished clinically from an Andres Iniesta through ball.*

obligatory element", as in *Iniesta passed* (cf. also, e.g., Sweet 1891:89f., Biber et al. 1999:141). As pointed out by Huddleston & Pullum (2002:216), the notion of transitivity is often more usefully applied to verb use than to verbs as such, since not all verbs are either transitive or intransitive: "although *faint* is always intransitive many verbs can occur either with or without an object. For example, *read* is intransitive in *She read* and transitive in *She read the letter*" (cf. Jespersen 1924:158, Quirk et al. 1985:1169). In a similar vein, Biber et al. (1999:147) note: "It is striking that a lot of English verbs have both transitive and intransitive uses", *pass* being a prime example. Incidentally, this also applies to Swedish verbs (*SAG* 2:535). As is well known, a special transitive–intransitive relationship holds for ergative – or dual-transitivity – verbs: *Joe opened the door* versus *The door opened* (cf. Biber et al. 1999:147, Huddleston & Pullum 2002:217).[6] Such verbs, however, will not be further considered here, nor – with one or two exceptions – shall we be concerned with Quirk et al's (1985:54) distinction between monotransitive, ditransitive and complex transitive verbs. Thus, when we speak about transitive versus intransitive use of football verbs, what we refer to are monotransitive verbs, i.e. verbs with one object, as in *Iniesta passed [the ball]* and *Messi finished [the attack]*.[7]

Of special relevance to our present purposes is the omission – or, rather, omissibility – of objects under specific circumstances, a well-known aspect of some, but not all, transitive verbs. Why, for example, is it that the same object (*the ball*) is omissible in *Iniesta passed the ball to Messi* but not in *Barcelona possessed the ball for 72% of the match*?

From an overall communicative perspective, omission of objects – or indeed any linguistic element – can be seen as a special exponent of a general principle of expressive economy, underlying various types of ellipsis, along the lines of: "Do not say more than you have to for the message to get across!"[8] To ensure communicative clarity, however, it

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[6] Sweet (1891:90) calls this class of verbs "passival": "their grammatical subject is logically their direct object, as in *the book sells well*".

[7] In a valency context, such verbs are often referred to as (one type of) "two-place verbs", co-occurring with a subject and another clause element (cf. Biber et al. (1999:141, 147).

[8] Cf. "Zipf's Law", embodying the "principle of least effort" (Zipf 1949). From a pragmatic perspective, object omission may be seen as a syntactic reflection of Grice's well-known "maxim of quantity", implying (second sub-maxim) that one should avoid being more informative than necessary (Levinson 1983:101). Cf. also Jespersen's

can only be applied as long as the omitted element can be identified, or "recovered", one way or another. Commenting on ellipsis, Halliday (1967:206) notes that "what is left unsaid cannot be otherwise than taken for granted." Similarly, in a critical aside on grammarians' tendency to overuse their "panacea", ellipsis, Jespersen (1924:307) admonishes grammarians to be "wary in admitting ellipses except where there can be no doubt as to what is understood." More specifically, Sweet (1891:90) notes that "transitive verbs can [...] stand without any object-noun [...] when [it] may be understood from the context" (cf. Quirk et al. 1985:1169). A typical example of this is the phrase *Stand and deliver!*, as ordered by highwaymen and brigands in the old days of (original) highway robbery. The normally transitive verb *deliver* may here occur without an object since the context clarifies, unequivocally, what should be delivered, i.e. the travellers' money and valuables. Interestingly, objectless *deliver* is also common in present-day English as a metaphorical expression, although in other contexts, as in *The team (government) failed to deliver*, where *the goods* is usually the understood object (cf. e.g. *LDOCE: deliver*).

Huddleston & Pullum (2002:301) discuss the sentence *They won*. They argue that the intransitive use of *win* here is "interpreted as 'win a contest', and which contest it was can be determined from the context." In such cases, further, "the omission of the object ... is restricted to particular verbs." Thus, there appear to be certain idiosyncratic lexical constraints at work, permitting some verbs, but not others, to drop their objects in certain contexts. Along the same lines, Biber et al. (1999:147) speak about "object-deleting verbs", i.e. verbs such as *paint*, *write*, *drive*, *drink*, *eat*, *read*. Quirk et al. (1985:722f.), describing the transitive–intransitive relation as one of "conversion", distinguish between, among others, the following types of object omission: (a) "A specific object is understood from the situational context", e.g. *Don't touch!*; (b) "A nonspecific object is semantically entailed", e.g. *They can't spell*. (For Swedish, cf. *SAG* 3:297.) Especially the first type of omission is highly

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(1924:309) discussion of "suppression", akin to Grice's quantity maxim: "we suppress a great many things which it would be pedantic to say expressly"; "Only bores want to express everything, but even bores find it impossible to express everything." For a more technical, in-depth perspective on "null-complement phenomena", i.e. omissions, see Ruppenhofer & Michaelis (2014).

relevant as regards certain intransitively used football verbs. This is illustrated in the title example – but note that somebody completely ignorant of even the basics of football, thus unable to associate the example with a game of football, would be at a loss to identify the missing objects of the verbs *passed* and *finished*. At the same time, as mentioned in section 1, omitted objects may vary in "precision", in general language as well as in football language. Consequently, they are not always uniquely recoverable: "the object idea [may be] so vague or uncertain that it is not necessary or easy [...] to express it" (Sweet 1891:90).

From a communicative perspective, the basic point of the above discussion is the recoverability of the omitted object, which, in turn, is dependent on a variety of linguistic, contextual and situational factors, as well as background knowledge. This can be illustrated by the most basic of all ball-sport verbs, i.e. *play*. A sentence like *They played beautifully* is, in isolation, multiply ambiguous, its full interpretation heavily dependent on context. If uttered after a game of football, the verb *played* will have *football*, or *the game*, as its self-evident "understood" object. If uttered after, say, a concert, *played* will have another, equally self-evident missing object, i.e. *music*, *concert*, *violin*, etc. Each subject field, or event, thus creates its own contextual and situational conditions for object omission. In a way, two different – but polysemous – verbs *play*, each with its own set of omissible objects, could be said to be involved in the different interpretations.[9] The kind of inferencing required for a full interpretation of *They played beautifully* in different contexts and situations is part of any communicatively competent speaker's language ability. From another angle, unless the "missing" object is recoverable, the message will be incomprehensible or blurred – expressive economy at the expense of communicative clarity.

Let us proceed to another aspect of transitivity, involving the nature of objects that may co-occur with specific verbs, thus of clear relevance to certain transitive football verbs. Just as verbs may have certain restrictions concerning what type of subject they can take (e.g. animate versus inanimate), there may also be restrictions concerning type of object (cf. Quirk et al. 1985:771f., Biber et al. 1999:378). For example,

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[9] For some discussion of the different meanings of *play* in relation to "the whole notion of discrete lexical senses", see Lyons (1977:554).

the football verb *kick* requires an animate, human subject (i.e. a player) and (normally, barring a foul) a concrete, inanimate object (i.e. ball) – cf. *Messi kicked the ball* versus **The ball kicked Messi*. The same applies to the football verb *pass* (*Iniesta passed the ball*), as opposed to the "ordinary" verb *pass*, which is why the sentence *The ball passed Iniesta* ('The ball went past Iniesta'), unlike **The ball kicked Messi*, is fully grammatical; the general-language verb *pass* has a different meaning and different selectional restrictions from those of the homonymous football verb.[10]

Quirk et al. (1985:1176) divide monotransitive verbs into "semantic groups, according to the kinds of subject and object that they take". Among these are verbs with "[t]ypically animate subject + typically concrete object", e.g. *carry* and *clean*, and verbs with "[t]ypically animate subject + typically animate object", e.g. *admire* and *kill*. The word "typically" in these formulations is important, indicating that verbs may often belong to more than one category, i.e. that boundaries between categories tend to be blurred. For example, the verb *kill* typically takes an animate object (to kill *somebody*), whereas *buy* and *sell* normally take inanimate objects (to buy/sell *something*). In football language, however, these verbs often take "unconventional" objects: *kill* may co-occur with an inanimate object, *buy* and *sell* with human objects (see section 4). As will be seen, such apparent violations of selection restrictions often involve a transition from literal to metaphorical meaning (cf. Chomsky 1965:149, Quirk et al. 1985:772).

3. Omission of football objects

As emphasized in the previous section, object omission can only take place under the condition of recoverability, where contextual factors play a dominant role. One such factor is the overall conceptual framework, or semantic sphere, characteristic of different subject fields and,

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[10] The restrictions just exemplified, involving what are, basically, semantic categories with syntactic effects (e.g. ±abstract, ±animate, ±human) are, of course, readily recognizable as Chomsky's (1965:95, 113, 149ff.) "selectional rules", the violation of which may result in deviant sentences like **The boy may frighten sincerity*, on a par with **The ball kicked Messi* (cf. Huddleston & Pullum 2002:227). Quirk et. al. (1985:771f.) use the more transparent term "semantic restrictions".

consequently, of special languages. The conceptual framework of football, and football language, is characterized by notions such as 'play', 'game', 'win', 'lose', 'goal', 'ball', 'shoot', 'pass', 'save', 'attack'. Knowledge of football's conceptual framework is thus a necessary requirement for the proper identification of missing objects in football language; the same applies to the special languages of other subject fields. Also, object omission within a special subject field may be at least partially genre- or register-dependent (cf. Ferguson 1983, Müller 2008). According to Ruppenhofer & Michaelis (2010:163f.), stressing "the connection between genres and argument omission", "certain genres license object omissions that are otherwise permitted only in generic-habitual contexts", match reports being mentioned as one such genre. Further, live match reporting may, due to time pressure, give rise to a higher frequency of omitted objects than, say, a post-match analysis of a game.

Let us briefly return to the football verb *pass*, as used in the title example (*Iniesta passed*). We have already noted that the understood missing object of *passed* can only be *the ball*, uniquely identified by the football context. Put differently, object deletion in this case – converting *pass* from a transitive to an intransitive verb – is made possible by the football context. This may be compared with the unacceptability in general language of freely omitting the object of *pass* as a transitive verb. At the breakfast table, for example, an imperative sentence like **Pass, please* would be incomprensible: it could never be interpreted as the intransitive (objectless) equivalent of, e.g., *Pass the butter, please*. There are many things on a breakfast table that may be passed (bread, butter, jam, etc.) – on the football pitch, there is only one: the ball. In other words, the breakfast context does not enable object omission with *pass*; the football context does, meeting the requirement of recoverability.

In view of the fact that, for players and spectators alike, the ball is at the very centre of attention for (at least) 90 minutes during a game of football, it is hardly surprising that it is often omitted with various football verbs, among them *pass*. Below are some other examples, of varying frequency, of football verbs with *ball* as the omitted object,

starting with verbs relating to the actions of outfield players, as often heard and seen in football reports and commentary:[11]

> *shoot*: Marta *shot* [the ball] hard past the keeper to make it 3–1
> *sidefoot*: Rooney calmly *sidefooted* [the ball] into the bottom corner
> *strike*: Ronaldo *struck* [the ball] powerfully into the back of the net
> *fire*: Neymar *fired* [the ball] over the bar from 18 yards
> *backheel*: The Celtic defender clumsily *backheeled* [the ball] into his own net
> *clear*: Terry *cleared* [the ball] miraculously just off the line
> *cross*: Pirlo *crossed* [the ball] into the penalty area
> *curl*: Beckham *curled* [the ball] wide
> *head*: Ibrahimovic *headed* [the ball] home for 2–2
> *collect*: The midfielder *collected* [the ball] and shot from the edge of the box
> *play*: The Real striker needlessly *played* [the ball] back to the midfield
> *recover*: The Liverpool defender *recovered* [the ball] and passed to Milner[12]

Goalkeepers, as opposed to outfield players, are associated with, e.g., the following verbs:

> *save*: Hart *saved* [the ball] from point-blank range[13]
> *parry*: Casillas was alert and parried [the ball] to safety
> *tip*: Neuer heroically *tipped* [the ball] on to the bar
> *fist*: The keeper *fisted* [the ball] away

At this point, a few comments of general relevance should be made. First of all, in the above examples, *ball* may be regarded as the prototypically omitted object, not as the only, uniquely recoverable one. In some – but not all – of the examples, other omitted objects are equally conceivable, such as *shot* in connection with verbs like *clear* and *strike*. For these and many other verbs (e.g. *sidefoot* and *head*), there is no clear semantic difference between *ball* versus *shot* as omitted objects; for goalkeeping verbs such as *save*, the understood object may also be conceived as, e.g., *free kick* or *penalty*.

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[11] Ruppenhofer & Michaelis (2010:164), discussing omitted objects, note that they are "entities that are not only mutually identifiable to speaker and hearer but also a current joint focus of attention, e.g. [...] the ball in the match-report genre."
[12] Cf. *Messi quickly recovered [from his injury] to produce an epic comeback*, where *recovered* has its usual general-language meaning.
[13] Cf. the following piece of wordplay on a banner at a football match, as observed by Morris (1981:301): *Jesus saves but Smith nets the rebounds*.

Further, as regards semantic roles, *ball* as object typically appears in "agent–patient clauses [and] expresses the patient role" (Huddleston & Pullum 2002:245), i.e. the "affected" role in the terminology of, e.g., Quirk et al. (1985:741) and Biber et al. (1999:127). As we shall see presently, this is not always the case with omissible football objects.

It should also be stressed that not all transitive football verbs may occur, with equal ease, without an object. For example, the football verb par excellence, *kick*, whose self-evident object is normally *the ball* (occasionally, less normally, a player in the opposition). Nonetheless, *kick* does not readily permit object omission, as evidenced by the rarity (as confirmed by web searches) of, e.g., *?She kicked into the net* instead of *She kicked the ball into the net*, in contrast to the perfectly normal *She shot (fired, sidefooted, struck, backheeled,* etc.*) into the net.*; the same goes for *?She hit into the net* for *She hit the ball into the net.* Interestingly, the verb *deliver* – which often occurs without an object in general language (cf. section 2) – apparently does not gladly part from its object (*ball*) in football language: *?*The Villa striker delivered into the penalty box* – as opposed to the common intransitive general-language use: *Arsenal didn't deliver*. Likewise, the stative verb *possess* – central to the notion of "possession football" – does not normally occur without *ball* in tow: cf. *Barcelona possessed the ball for more than 70 per cent of the match* – **Barcelona possessed for more than ...* (but: *Barcelona dominated for 90 minutes*; cf. below).

Thus, as noted earlier, there appear to be various idiosyncratic lexical constraints determining the omissibility of objects in football language (and not only there; cf. section 2). Despite similar meaning, individual verbs may behave differently in this respect – often a matter of relative rather than absolute preference. This should be kept in mind as we consider some other omitted objects below. Another point worth mentioning is that some verbs may occur freely without an accompanying adverbial (cf. *She shot and the keeper saved*), whereas others seem to prefer the company of an adverbial, indicating manner or location/direction (cf. *He curled wide* versus *?He curled*). This also applies to certain other football verbs, as will be seen below.

With regard to Swedish, the corresponding football verbs tend to behave in roughly the same way as the English ones exemplified above, permitting the omission of *bollen* ('the ball') in similar contexts: *Marta sköt hårt* (cf. *Marta shot hard*), *Ibrahimovic nickade i mål* (cf.

Ibrahimovic headed home), *Hart räddade* (cf. *Hart saved*) – but hardly *?Hon sparkade i mål* (cf. *?She kicked into the net*). It thus appears that English and Swedish football verbs share the same basic principles and similar lexical constraints governing the omissibility of objects (cf. *SAG* 3:297, Bäckström 2013).

Alongside *ball*, one of the most frequently omitted football objects is *goal*, exemplified below:

> *score*: Chelsea *scored* [a goal] again on the half-hour
> *net*: The West Ham youngster finally *netted* [a goal]
> *miss*: Kane *missed* [the goal] but scored the rebound to put Spurs ahead
> *save*: The keeper *saved* [the goal] with her foot to keep Japan in the game
> *concede*: Milan *conceded* [a goal] just before the half-time whistle
> *defend*: The visitors *defended* [their goal] bravely for a full 90 minutes

As already emphasized, alternative missing objects are often conceivable in connection with football verbs, *save* being a case in point; the verb *net* may also occur with *ball* as a missing object: *She netted [the ball] confidently from the penalty spot*. Another example is *miss*, which may take *chance* or *opportunity* as its omissible object. By contrast, the verbs *score* and *concede* often take *equalizer* ('equalizing goal') as their object: *Milan scored (conceded) an equalizer just before half-time*. In this sentence, however, the object cannot be omitted on the model of *goal*. From the sentence *Milan scored (conceded)*, the object *goal* is automatically recoverable, being, as it were, "built into" the football senses of *score* and *concede* as an entailment relation (see e.g. Lyons 1977:788f., Levinson 1983:174, Cruse 1986:14); by contrast, *equalizer* is not recoverable, being semantically too specific to be entailed by *score* and *concede*. The fact that the missing object may be *interpreted* as an equalizer, given the right contextual and situational circumstances (in particular, the score at the moment of the utterance), is a different matter. In parallel fashion, also depending on context, the verb *shoot* may occasionally be perceived as having *goal* as its missing object. From a sentence such as *Messi shot from the edge and equalized Barcelona*, a goal may be inferred, but only thanks to the co-occurrence of *and equalized Barcelona* – on its own, the phrase *shot from the edge* says nothing about the result of Messi's effort. In this respect, then, *shoot* contrasts with the verbs *score* and *concede*, where *goal* is always the

built-in, uniquely recoverable object: cf. *Ronaldo scored* versus *Ronaldo shot*.

Compared to Swedish, the most notable difference is that the normal Swedish equivalents of *score* and *concede*, with omitted objects, are expressions where the object, i.e. *mål* ('goal'), is retained: *göra (ett) mål* (cf. Engl. *make a goal*) and *släppa in ett mål* (cf. Engl. *let in a goal*). Corresponding to objectless *score*, there is also the intransitive verb *näta* (cf. Engl. *net*), as well as its somewhat facetious synonym *måla*; however, these verbs are nowhere near as frequent as *göra mål*.

In connection with, in particular, the verbs *score* and *concede*, with reverse meanings, the absence of an object, i.e. *goal*, naturally means that it cannot be modified; this, of course, applies to all missing objects. Instead, in some cases, the verb itself may be modified by an adverbial. For example, *Arsenal scored (conceded) a last-minute goal* is equivalent to *Arsenal scored (conceded) in the last minute*; cf. also *Walcott scored a glorious goal – Walcott scored gloriously*, *City conceded two goals in ten minutes – City conceded twice in ten minutes*. However, this expedient does not always seem to be available, restricting the possibility of object omission, not only in football language.[14]

From a semantic point of view, *goal* as an omissible object tends to differ from *ball*: cf. *score [a goal]* versus *pass [a ball]*. While *ball* is usually assigned the semantic role of "patient" or "affected" (cf. above), *goal* mostly involves the outcome of the verb action, what Jespersen (1924:159f.) and others (e.g., Quirk et al. 1985:749f., Biber et al. 1999:127) refer to as "object of result" or "resultant object".[15] This type of object is at its most obvious with verbs like *score* and *concede*; less so with *save*. From a wider perspective, the semantic-role contrast between *ball* and *goal* can be seen as a reflection of the different functions of the ball and the goal in the game of football, where the ball serves as the prerequisite means to a certain end, i.e. scoring goals.

The omitted objects so far discussed – *ball*, *shot* and *goal* – may be characterized as fairly specific, representing key elements in any game of football. However, omitted objects may also be of a more abstract or vague nature (cf. Sweet 1891:90). One such case was mentioned in

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[14] Cf. e.g. *She wrote (read) an amazing book* versus *She wrote (read) amazingly*.
[15] Cf. Ruppenhofer & Michaelis (2010:164): "objects in resultative constructions are omissible in match reports but not outside that genre."

section 1, in connection with the verb *finish* in the title example (*Messi finished clinically*), used intransitively. It was argued that the omitted object, part of the semantic make-up of this football use of *finish*, is *attack*: *Messi finished the attack clinically*. This kind of omitted object is clearly a shade less specific than, e.g., *ball*.[16]

A similar kind of rather imprecise omissible object is *opposition*, often in connection with the verb *attack*: *From the first minute PSG attacked [the opposition] relentlessly*. As always, the object may be more varied when not omitted, including the names of specific clubs: *the opposition's goal (penalty box, defence, Chelsea,* etc.). Incidentally, *defend* as a football verb may also be used intransitively: *Liverpool defended well*. Here, however, the omitted object is the corresponding reflexive pronoun; cf. the alternative *Liverpool defended themselves well*. Further, in contrast to verbs like *attack*, the transitive football verb *beat* (*Arsenal beat Chelsea 2-0*) never occurs without an object (**Arsenal beat 2–0*); again, idiosyncratic lexical constraints seem to be in operation.

Interestingly, most of the corresponding Swedish football verbs (*avsluta* 'finish', *anfalla* 'attack', *slå* 'beat') behave in identical ways to the English ones just discussed with regard to the omissibility of objects. This also applies to the next group of omitted objects and their concomitant verbs.

For some verbs, the missing object is even more general than the ones mentioned so far, referring to the game of football itself. Earlier on (section 2), the noun *football* was mentioned as the understood object in the sentence *They played [football] beautifully*; cf. *They played beautiful football*. Other omissible objects, like *game* or *match,* are equally possible: *They played [the game] beautifully*. With some other verbs – such as *win* and *lose*, but also, e.g., *dominate* – *game* and *match* (but not *football*) are also readily omissible: *The London side won (lost) [the game]*, *Germany dominated [the match] throughout the first half*. Incidentally, a more specific verb such as *referee* may also drop its object: *Who refereed [the match]? –Pierluigi Collina*. Naturally, more

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[16] Obviously, the verb *finish* is not here used intransitively in the same way as in a sentence like *The match finished in a draw*, where *finished* (=*ended*) exemplifies a more "genuinely" intransitive verb use, i.e. without an omitted object, in the same way as, e.g., *The door opened*; cf. Quirk et al. (1985:1169).

detailed objects – variants of *game* or *match* – are often conceivable, e.g., *the Champions League final.*

So far, our discussion of omitted objects in football language has concerned monotransitive verbs. In a few cases, however, a ditransitive or complex transitive verb may be involved. For example, the verb *deny*, usually taking both a direct and an indirect object (*They denied him access*) often turns up in football contexts: *Julio Cesar denied Ronaldo brilliantly* (cf. also the passive equivalent: *R. was brilliantly denied by J.C.*). Those familiar with football and English football language will know that the sentence refers to an excellent piece of goalkeeping by Julio Cesar, denying an opponent player a goal by making a brilliant save. In other words, the verb *deny* here functions as an action verb (cf. also the adverbial *brilliantly*, a seemingly odd collocate of *deny*), with an omitted direct object, i.e. *goal*.[17]

An even more conspicuous example of radical simplification in terms of omitted clause elements is provided by the verb *convert*. It is usually classified as a complex transitive verb (Quirk et. al 1985:53ff., 1200), constructed with an object and/or a complement introduced by *(in)to*: *They converted the sofa /into a bed/, They converted /to Catholicism/.* As a football verb, however, *convert* may also be used "absolutely", without an object, in sentences like this: *Özil was awarded a penalty but failed to convert.* True, this frequent use of *convert* in football language, with neither an object nor a complement in place, looks superficially similar to the intransitive use of *convert* in, e.g., *They converted* (e.g. to Catholicism). At a deeper level, however, it is essentially different, being a syntactically abbreviated version of *... but failed to convert the penalty into goal.* In other words, both the direct object (*the penalty*) and the complement (*into goal*) are conveniently omitted, recoverable from the immediate situational context – a striking gain in expressive economy, also illustrating the somewhat imprecise nature of the understood object (*penalty*, *chance, opportunity*, etc.).

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[17] Cf. also cases like *The keeper denied [Ronaldo] a powerful shot*, where it is the *indirect* object that may be omitted; cf. the alternative construction: *The keeper denied a powerful shot from Ronaldo.*

4. Unconventional football objects

Apart from the omissibility of certain recoverable objects, discussed in the preceding section, football language may display its special character in other ways related to verb usage. For example, due to their special meaning, football verbs often co-occur with what may – from a general-language perspective – be seen as somewhat unexpected adverbials, e.g., *finish clinically* and *deny brilliantly*, as exemplified earlier. In this section, we shall consider another collocational aspect of football language (and, in many cases, sports language at large), namely the co-occurrence of certain verbs with objects that may be perceived as clearly unconventional in relation to general language, mainly in terms of infringements of "normal" selectional restrictions (cf. section 2).

Animacy is a well-known semantic feature, of considerable relevance to verbs and their patterns of co-occurrence with subjects and objects. For example, the verb *kill* prototypically takes an animate (agentive) subject as well as an animate (affected) object (*John killed Bill*, *The lion killed the lamb*). However, there are also less prototypical cases, by no means rare, such as *The stone killed Bill* and *Curiosity killed the cat*, with inanimate (instrumental) subjects (cf. Quirk et al. 1985:743, Biber et al. 1999:124).

In metaphorical usage, less prototypical objects may also occur, in general language as well as in football language. One such example is the well-known everyday expression *to kill time*, before boarding a plane, for instance. On the football pitch, the same expression often has a related but special meaning, referring to a sort of go-slow action, deliberately wasting time to prevent the opposing team from scoring: *Spurs were trying to kill time towards the end of the game*. The verb *kill*, with a special meaning, also turns up in other metaphorical football phrases, such as *kill /off/ the match* (*game*), as in *Their third goal killed the match*, i.e. decided the game for good, ahead of time.[18]

Thus, the verb *kill* provides examples of football usage that deviates from general language by taking non-prototypical, inanimate objects, forcing a metaphorical interpretation (cf. Quirk et al. 1985:772). The

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[18] The verb *close* could have been used as a metaphorical synonym of *kill* (*They should have closed the game in the first half*), a kind of usage related to familiar phrases like *close the argument* and *close the deal*.

same kind of usage is common in Swedish football language (*Målet dödade matchen* ('The goal killed the match').

The distinction between human and non-human (inanimate) football objects is relevant in many other cases. Some football verbs normally take human objects, reflecting events on the pitch, e.g. the roughly synonymous *tackle* and *challenge*: *The defender cynically tackled him from behind*.[19] On the other hand, in general language, a verb like *read* typically takes inanimate objects, such as books and other reading matter. However, *read* may also, in metaphorical usage, take human objects, with the meaning of 'see through': *She read him like an open book*. This kind of use is also found in the context of football: *The keeper read the penalty taker and was able to save*. But *read* may also occur with non-human football objects: *The keeper read the penalty (free kick, shot) and parried.*

So far, the cases dealt with have mainly concerned instances of metaphorical usage, in which there are clear parallels between general language and football language but where football language may exhibit a range of objects specific to football. However, differences between general language and football language may be even more conspicuous. This applies not least to the converse verb pair *buy* and *sell*. Since the abolition of slavery, these verbs normally take only non-human objects in general-language contexts. In football language, however, examples like the following abound, especially during the so-called "silly season" when the "transfer window" is open for clubs to buy and sell players:

> Real Madrid *bought (purchased) Ronaldo* from Manchester United in 2009
> Manchester United *sold Ronaldo* to Real Madrid in 2009
> Manchester United lost a number of fans when they *traded Ronaldo* to Madrid

The occurrence of a human object with verbs such as *sell* and *buy*, and *purchase* and *trade*, speaks volumes about today's football as big business. At a more general level, it demonstrates the close connection between linguistic phenomena and the "real" world, where changing conditions often give rise to changed usage. It may be added that, unsurprisingly, Swedish usage is here identical to English. Buying and

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[19] Incidentally, *tackle* and *challenge* may also ocur with omitted objects: *Jovetic challenged from behind, but no yellow card.*

selling players is a universal feature of international football (and professional sports at large), reflected in similar ways in the world's football languages.

Another group of football verbs involving the frequent – and, linguistically, perhaps more surprising – appearance of human objects includes examples such as the following: *The Barcelona boss rested Suárez for the midweek game*, *Hodgson decided to play Rooney out on the left*.

The most common use of *rest* as a general-language verb is intransitive: *rest for two hours*. When used transitively, its object is more often than not a part of the body: *rest one's legs*. In football language, however, it may also take a human object, i.e. a player, as illustrated in the first of the above sentences. The verb *rest* has a distinctly causative meaning (cf. Sweet 1891:90, Quirk et al. 1985: 745f.), its subject usually being the manager or coach of a team.[20] This also applies to the verb *play*, which in general language, when used transitively, does not normally take human objects. In a football context, however, *play* often takes a player as its object, with a meaning opposite that of *rest*, as exemplified in the second sentence.[21] It is notable that the corresponding Swedish verbs – *vila* ('rest') and *spela* ('play') – can be used in the same causative way, with players as objects, a usage most likely inspired by the syntactic behaviour of the two English football verbs.

A similar use is displayed by the verb *sign*. In general language (cf. e.g. *LDOCE*: *sign* v), this verb may be used intransitively, with an understood object (*Sign here, please*), but more often transitively, with inanimate objects (one's name, a contract, etc.). In football language, *sign* may also take a human object, like *buy* and *sell*: *"I nearly signed Ibrahimovic," admits Wenger*. The example can be seen as a convenient shorthand for *"I nearly made Ibrahimovic sign a contract (with Arsenal)"*. Thus, the behaviour of *sign* is yet another example of causative verb use in football language, where a player turns up as the

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[20] A similar, causative use of *rest*, with *patient* as object, may be found in medical language: *Rest the patient for 10–15 minutes in a supine position*. In football language, this use of *rest* is more or less synonymous with the verb *bench*: *Enrique benched Suárez for the midweek game*; cf also: *drop a player*.

[21] The verb *play* also occurs with certain other, special football objects, e.g. *play the offside trap* (defence tactics), *play the advantage* (refereeing).

(superficial) object, corresponding to the subject in *Ibrahimovic signed (the contract)*.[22] Here, too, Swedish usage has followed suit, to the point of importing the verb *sign* as a direct loan (*sajna*): *Real Madrid är på gång att sajna den kinesiske mittfältaren Lin Liangming* ('R.M. are on their way to signing the Chinese midfielder L.L').[23]

Summing up, this section has focused on some different types of unconventional football objects, where the common denominator has been the violation of what may be seen as the "normal" selectional restrictions of certain verbs; from a general-language perspective, such infringements often give rise to superficially odd collocations. In some cases, they may result in metaphorical usage (e.g., *The third goal killed the match*). In others, the unconventional objects may be due to the occurrence of human instead of inanimate objects of certain verbs: players may be rested, bought and sold, as well as signed – reflecting, in a way, their status as almost dehumanized commodities in the heavily commercialized world of football.

5. Concluding remarks

The overall purpose of this article has been to argue that football language, like other special languages, is not merely a matter of lexical interest. Certainly, terminology remains at the core of all special languages as its most easily recognized characteristic. However, as we have attempted to show here, football language is also special by virtue of certain syntactic and semantic features having to do with transitivity, related to the situational context of football as well as to certain specific football-related genres, such as match reports and commentary.

Our focus has been on two areas of verb syntax, setting football language apart from general language: the omission – for reasons of expressive economy – of certain contextually recoverable "football objects" (*ball*, *shot*, *goal*, etc.) and the occurrence of "unconventional" objects (e.g., human objects of verbs such as *buy*, *sell*, *rest* and *play*). To be sure, our exemplification and discussion can lay no claim to being

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[22] *LDOCE* (*sign* v) notes that the same kind of usage applies in certain musical contexts: *CBS Records had signed her back in 1988 on a three-album contract*.
[23] For discussion of the impact of English football loans on European languages, see Bergh & Ohlander (2012b).

exhaustive – for example, the idiosyncratic lexical constraints that seem to determine the relative propensity of football verbs to omit objects are clearly in need of further elucidation. Still, we hope to have demonstrated that football language is indeed a rewarding field of syntactic-semantic inquiry, well worth in-depth exploration; this may also, as a side-effect, shed some further light on classic areas in syntax, semantics and pragmatics. In particular, the phenomena discussed here illustrate the close relationship between language and reality, not least the relevance of contextual and situational settings for syntactic form, selectional restrictions and collocations.

In closing, we would like to repeat that the examples discussed in this article are by no means unique to football language; many of them – concerning both omissible and unconventional objects – could also relate to other ball sports, or to sports language at large. More generally, all special subject areas tend to create their own contextual framework, involving a specific semantic-pragmatic sphere. This, in turn, paves the way for constructions and collocations that may deviate considerably – even spectacularly – from those applying in general language, thus helping to distinguish special languages from general language. Football language, it appears, is an obvious case in point.

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