Global sport meets global English: you’re the referee

Athletes and others involved in the highly visible world of sport sometimes speak through interpreters and sometimes don’t. Who are the winners and losers?

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Articles about language in the world of sport can illustrate more general questions, such as:

- Do people communicate more effectively in a lingua franca or by speaking their mother tongue?
- Is translation just a matter of words?
- Is use of English seen as a prerequisite for international respectability?
- Is something invariably lost in translation or is something perhaps gained?

The examples I’ve come across don’t necessarily provide answers, just a few hints and a dose of entertainment. After all, sport is all about fun, isn’t it? Here we go - get your scorecards ready!

Nadal and Ferrer in two languages

Up first is the Open Racket column in The Wall Street Journal. Rafael Nadal and David Ferrer were each asked, “How do you feel about your game as we head into the second week of the tournament?” and requested to respond in both English and Spanish. The two answers were then compared. Each player’s response in his mother tongue was more nuanced, especially in Ferrer’s case. For more read Same Query in Two Languages Doesn’t Necessarily Translate.

Manchester United player allegedly criticizes manager

When asked why he hadn’t been playing much under new manager David Moyes, Shinji Kagawa was reported to have said, “Please ask David Moyes why I'm not in the side”. But when Ben Mabley, a freelance journalist and translator based in Osaka, read this he was suspicious and came to the conclusion that it was a case of mistranslation, with cultural and linguistic subtleties - and a good deal of context - lost in the shuffle.

Mr. Mabley also notes "... the truth is that many quotes will be gathered by journalists with full command of either original or target language – but not both – then crudely translated to be polished for publication later. Often, the hurried translation process involves little more than asking a similarly busy, in this case Japanese journalist, for the basic gist.”

And music to the ears of all translators and interpreters: “... as any professional translator knows,
mastery of multiple languages is no guarantee of the skill to interpret accurately between them.”

Read more in The Guardian: Manchester United star Shinji Kagawa's quotes are lost in translation.

Interpreters on the mound

In 2013 Major League Baseball decided to level the playing field: interpreters are now allowed to accompany coaches onto the field for mound conferences with pitchers that do not speak their language. It’s about time too - after all the MLB rulebook doesn’t establish English as the official language. And there were clear communication problems – pitchers often didn’t understand what the coach was trying to say but nodded agreement just to be polite. “Oh, sure, that happens all the time... that’s pretty much what’s going on out there,” said Kenji Nimura, an experienced MLB interpreter. Get more insightful information in Strikes Come Easier than Words (NY Times).

You can also read more about interpreting for baseball in this Nataly Kelly interview of Kenji Nimura in The Huffington Post blog.

Pitchers trade interpreters

A first for interpreters! Major league baseball teams commonly trade players but 2013 saw Hiroki Kuroda and Yu Darvish exchange translators. It wasn’t officially a “trade” however; the translators had become free agents in the off-season and then signed contracts with each other’s previous team (terms of the contracts were not disclosed). But hey, they made it into the New York Times: Dueling Pitchers, Swapped Interpreters.

Madrid mayor Ana Botella speaks English before the IOC

Ana Botella’s speech in English supporting Madrid’s bid to host the 2020 Olympic Games has gone viral in Spain and beyond. Some even blame her for Madrid losing out to Tokyo, though that seems like an idea far out in left field. Eduardo Paz agrees and has explained why in this post on Bootheando (in Spanish).

Nonetheless, the speech has touched nerves and funny bones. Her invitation to a “relaxing cup of café con leche” has already entered the pantheon of memorable quotes. Curious? Go directly to the video on youtube and the countless comments it provoked.

The WSJ says that her performance may even complicate her political future, while El País points out that when asked about unemployment, she talked about infrastructure: Ana Botella, el inglés y para qué sirven los cascos.

Extra innings

If you translate and/or interpret from English, be sure to brush up on your sport analogies – the native variety of the language has more of them than Louisville has bats, and you certainly don’t want to strike out when the game's on the line.
And for some real sporting humor from the diamond, don’t miss the video of Abbott and Castello's classic *Who’s on first*.

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