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Race, ethnicity and 'African-ness' in football discourse – perspectives in the age of superdiversity¹

Introduction

Globalization, mass mobility, and economic and transcultural flows are changing the experience of diversity in many contemporary societies and communities. This is encapsulated in the notion of 'superdiversity', the growing complexity of what 'diversity' means, when new combinations of ethnicity and other variables, mobility, belonging and identification intersect in complex, less predictable ways (see Creese & Blackledge 2010: 550–552; Blommaert & Rampton 2011). Also the world of association football (soccer, henceforth 'football') is radically transformed by such processes of globalization (Giulianotti 1999; Giulianotti & Robertson 2009; Kytölä 2013). The mobility of 'actors-in-the-field' – professional and amateur football players, coaches, media, audiences, fans, and the like – has always been essential to football culture, but recent decades have accelerated such mobilities, leading to a complexity of patterns and outcomes of 'diversities' unparalleled before. Discussions of such issues in the context of football culture from the perspectives offered by superdiversity research are therefore timely and justified (Kytölä 2017).

With the 21st-century globalization epitomised by increased mobility, contexts of football activity – clubs, teams, competitions, games, supporter communities, online communities – have become culturally and ethnically more diverse (Giulianotti & Robertson 2009; Burdsey 2011; Hassan 2013; Kytölä 2017). From the point of view of sociolinguistics and discourse studies, these developments are accompanied by increasingly complex tensions and debates in different forms of *football discourse*, i.e. talk and text about football (Gerhardt 2012; Krøvel & Roksvold 2012; Kytölä 2013, 2017; van Sterkenburg & Spaaij 2014; Lavric et al. 2008). Discussions of football discourse in contemporary contexts should be connected to sociolinguistic research in superdiversity (e.g. Creese & Blackledge 2010; Blommaert & Rampton 2011; Leppänen & Häkkinen 2012; Androutsopoulos & Juffermans 2014); this chapter suggests some theoretical and empirical lines as signposts in such endeavour.

With regard to the abovementioned transitions of the footballing world, my aim here is to review and further advance the following line of arguments. Sport, particularly the globally most popular sport football, is a key domain of social and cultural life at large; in football culture, social categorisations, identifications and disidentifications with others are constructed and negotiated around the world. Increasingly, the mediatization of

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football draws and leads actors-in-the-field (supporters, fans, followers) to watch, read and listen to a variety of football related texts and shows, here labelled 'football discourse'. With the growth of digital social media, 'the participatory Web', 'Web 2.0', these actors-in-the-field are not only consuming, but also participating – writing and creating – football discourse in more diverse forms than before, leaving their mark particularly in various digital mediascapes. Such co-authored and collaborative texts, 'mundane media discourses', offer us a window *par excellence* through which to explore facets of social change. The chapter includes a review of relevant work from language studies as well as insights accrued within sociology, which have informed my agenda for a research strand on discourse-analytic, *sociolinguistic* study of football text and talk in the age of superdiversity. Then I move on to empirical examples from my research on football discourse on the tension between racist, anti-racist and 'race-neutral' discourses with a focus on the Finnish context, my area of specialization, and a concluding discussion.

In what follows, I empirically restrict myself to men's competitive football, which is also the most researched subdomain of football. Future research should equally explore similar and other issues in women's football, amateur and leisure football, youth football, and futsal (five-a-side indoor soccer endorsed and governed by national and transnational football associations). However, up to the 2010s, men's competitive football has been the major focus of research, and the present chapter reflects that bias. A brief note on the researcher's position is in place before progressing: I approach this topic of inquiry from a dual role of, first, a researcher with background in sociolinguistics, discourse studies and digital communication, and second, an actor-in-the field myself, first as a child spectator and fan, then as a junior player, grown-up player in men's competitions, yet later as coach, manager, president of a club, and a member in local and national bodies and committees in the administration of football and futsal. This has given me some first-hand experience of the diversity, stereotypes, and prejudice at the grassroots level of football, and, over time, a certain position to influence them.

Historical Perspectives

Football is arguably the ultimate 'globalized' sport – one of the most popular and permeating domains of social activity and culture in our late modern world of globalization, transculturality and increasing diversity (Giulianotti & Robertson 2009; Hassan 2013; Kytölä 2013). The mobility of players, fans, media crews, writers and other stakeholders are part and parcel of the phenomenology of this world sport, and so is mobility of football discourses. Football culture has local manifestations driven by factors such as nations, ethnicity, language(s), regions, rivalries, religion, politics, history, or economics (Giulianotti 1999); these layers of football culture are in constant flow and interchange with each other, mediated in complex ways (Krøvel & Roksvold 2012; van Sterkenburg & Spaaij 2014; Kytölä & Westinen 2015). This globalization of football (Giulianotti & Robertson 2009) has become even more intense in the past two–three

decades, as football matches, leagues and competitions are extensively broadcast and mediated around the world via contemporary technologies.

For decades, race and ethnicity have been central concerns in the domain of football – both practice and research – and the inequalities within and between societies at large have mirrored and acquired their specific forms in football life. Although academic discussions of race and ethnicity have a far longer history and a plethora of different approaches (see Eriksen 2010: 1–22), I adopt here the definition of ethnicity as “aspects of relationships between groups which consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive” (Eriksen 2010: 5). ‘Race’, with no clear evidence from genetics or the study of physical traits, and even more tenuous connection to cultural traits, is best placed in inverted commas; however, it exists as a socio-cultural construct informing people’s actions (Eriksen 2010: 6). Eriksen goes a long way in problematizing the complex differences and similarities between ethnicity and ‘race’, suggesting that ethnicity is a wider concept of the two (since not all ethnic distinctions are envisaged in racial terms), and summing up that they are “kindred terms which partly overlap” (*ibid.*, p. 9).

Core Issues and Topics

Despite the massive global appeal and connectivity of globally popular sports, they have received little attention in research on language, globalization and superdiversity (but see Madsen, this volume). Linguistically oriented research into the *language* of ethnicity and diversity in football has been scarce; and the need for sociolinguistically oriented research is growing. Football culture and discourse, in its highly global rate of penetration and high degrees of translocality, offers a window to explore social dynamics, change and mobility, key issues in globalization.

By *football discourse* I mean text and talk about different aspects of the game and football culture (Kytölä 2012, 2013, 2017; Kytölä & Westinen 2015). Sites of football discourse are, then, discursive spaces and sites of social action where categorizations, identifications and disidentifications are made (Leppänen et al. 2014; Leppänen et al. 2017). Talk and multimodal face-to-face interaction, while central for ‘doing football culture’, is, however, excluded from this chapter, which focuses on texts, media discourses, and digital media. Instead, my sociolinguistically framed focus is on *ways of writing* about groups of people or individuals; for example, an African player in Europe. Utilising online forum discussions, one key format of digital participatory media, as main data, along with online media articles as auxiliary, comparative data, the discussion in this chapter is based on popular discourses on the ethnic diversification of European football (see also Kytölä 2017), particularly debates around the mobility of different kinds of Black players in European-based clubs and national teams.

Ethnicity in the sociology of football

Of the classic (big) variables, ethnicity and race have been the key focus in social-scientific research on football. While research on football and gender, sexuality, or (dis)ability, for instance, should not be neglected, one explanation for the focus on ethnicity could be the competitive nature of the sports. Moreover, most football research has focused exclusively on men's competitive football, which also gains the most media coverage and followers.

Giulianotti, one of the key scholars in the sociology of football, calls racism within football "a cultural universal" (1999: 159), arguing that "football racism is particularly acute during periods of political and economic restructuring" (ibid., p. 160) and connecting racism to contexts such as the Thatcher government in the UK or the rise of the far right in the united Germany. The most common (and the most discussed) form of football racism is arguably the abuse and discrimination of 'non-white' players by 'white' audiences, supporters, players or coaches, or by media or institutions governed by 'whites' (cf. Giulianotti 1999: 159–164; Back, Crabbe and Solomos 2001; Hassan 2013). An important sub-topic in that line has been the representation – typically commodification or fetishization – of 'the black body' (see Miller et al. 2001: 69–71, 86–89; Andrews, Mower & Silk 2011). A persuasive myth in popular discourses on African football players and teams is the distinction between physicality vs. mentality: African players are fit and strong – or 'magical' and unpredictable – but need discipline to succeed, and this discipline is (at least implicitly) European/'White' (Giulianotti 1999: 161–163; King 2011). Connections and manifestations of ethnic discrimination in reality are far more complex than this prototype and lie out of my scope here (see Giulianotti 2016: 88–90; Eriksen 2010: 1–22).

In their review, Giulianotti and Robertson note that "small scattering of black players in European leagues encountered routine, unthinking racism across the football system" (2009: 21), and racist practices were abound on more structural levels, too, making it possible for European football nations to exploit their colonial connections to import elite talents, while the continents of Africa and also Asia were crudely under-represented in international football, notably FIFA World Cup. According to Giulianotti and Robertson (2009: 25–26), structural and micro-level racist practice continued as overt in football for decades, and anti-racism initiatives gained ground only from the late 1980s onwards. In the UK and across Europe, one of the most concrete outcomes of anti-racism was the criminalization of racist discourse (e.g., chants or banners). Moreover, football's governing bodies (notably FIFA) took action in expelling its most overtly racist member states (Rhodesia, South Africa) from competitive football (ibid., p. 26). Few football followers – only the most extreme racists – continue to deny the greatness of black (or otherwise 'non-white') players in the history and the evolution of the game; particularly black players with Brazilian (Pelé), Portuguese (Eusebio), Dutch (Ruud Gullit) or French (e.g. Marcel Desailly) nationalities have secured their places in lists of all-time football legends. However, different forms of structural and covert racial and ethnic

discrimination persist in football world and, as in society at large, it takes and effort to erase them (Giulianotti 2016: 88–95).

Shifting the focus to the issue of historically under-privileged African-origin players in historically privileged European fields and mediascapes, I now proceed to the following arguments: Since an integral part of competitive football is competition between nationalities, and because of transnational ties and movements of actors-in-the-field, particularly players moving between clubs in their careers, ethnicity and race are key axes of differentiation in football culture. The relationships and connections between ethnicity, race, origin, nationality, citizenship, place of residence, belonging and identity are becoming more and more complex with the current stage of globalization (see Kytölä 2017). A perhaps banal and simplified, but obvious and important, example is just to observe how the formerly ‘all-white’ European national teams (e.g. Germany, Italy, Sweden, Norway, Czech Republic) have recently had dark-skinned players. Such growing superdiversity, diminishing predictability, of ethnicity and nationality in football is key to 21st-century football discourse, as followers and supporters, players, coaches, journalists, and other actors-in-the-field are trying to make sense of and learn to live with their increasingly complex realities. Due to larger historical developments and narratives, such as slave trade, oppression and abuse of the African continent, and racism, and because of issues related to obvious physical difference, ‘black’ and ‘African’ have been the most critical categories of debate and (dis)identification in European football discourses so far.

New Debates

Entering the 21st century, the EU, its nation-states and UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) begin to fund The Football Against Racism in Europe (FARE) network founded in 1999; an example of the macro-level development that football institutions are, in discourse and official practice, condemning and battling racism (Giulianotti & Robertson 2009: 147; Back et al. 2001: 185–218; Burdsey 2011). However, what counts and is interpreted as ‘racism’ varies greatly across contexts; for instance, the UK has been more efficient in the eradication of overt football racism than Southern European or post-Communist nations (ibid., p. 148). As Giulianotti (1999: 161–162) states, the real problem of racism in football, however, lies not mainly on hooligan groups or extreme right-wing crowds. Both of them are marginal and peripheral in numbers, albeit destructive at worst and surely worth of media and scholarly attention; yet rather, the actual power of racist discrimination in football lies in the everyday practice and discourse of the majority, actors-in-the-field (see also Back, Crabbe & Solomos 1998, 2001: 75–102). Even as late as in 1996 – the summer of the European Championship in England noted for its slogan “Football’s coming home” – pervasive cultural racism was apparent in England in the exclusion that was patterned in both gendered and racial ways (Carrington 1998). The empirical examples presented below also attempt to unpack such practices, with a focus

on mundane media discourses and representations of ‘foreign’ or ‘black’ players by relatively ‘ordinary white’ people who have a stake to claim in the game. In such contexts racist or discriminatory discourses often occur together with, and in relation to, anti-racist and ‘pragmatic’, race-neutral discourses, as participants in them may not often be overtly, exclusively, or extremely racist or discriminatory in their thinking; rather, the discourses can be ambivalent, reflecting Late Modern cultural transitions in superdiversity in several ways.

Discussions in this chapter are, thus, informed by the sociolinguistics of globalization (Blommaert 2010), particularly its key tenet that simultaneously with the premises of the 21st century globalization – mobility, flux, unpredictability of people’s identities and positions in different societal domains, and new inequalities stemming from new combinations of diversities – we experience the mobility, flux and unpredictability of *language(s) and discourse(s)*. Language, along with other semiotic resources, is in a key role in how people make sense of their changing circumstances; studying language and discourse pertaining to issues of globalization is therefore needed. Sociolinguistic, discourse-analytical research into the multisemiotic discourses in social media sheds light on their social and cultural significance to participants and communities of practice. In social media, discourses about difference and (super)diversity are intertwined with collaborative, participatory knowledge construction and cultural (re)production of discourses on difference. Supporters and followers are debating issues such as: Which players with an immigrant background count as Finnish (or English, French, etc.)? How much ‘African-ness’, or how many black players, can be allowed in a European national team squad? From a larger research project on digital media (including institutional media such as newspapers and television), my empirical nexus points in digital social media for the research reported here come mainly from two main hubs for Finland-based football discussion: Futisforum and Futisforum2.org (for more, see Kytölä 2012, 2013).

Sociolinguistic study of participatory media

In the 21st-century mediascapes, digital media and the rise of ‘Web 2.0’ have become increasingly meaningful sociocultural and communicative spaces for participatory cultures building around shared activities. Digital media practices are translocal and transcultural, and participants in them engage with new forms of (super)diversity in different ways (Leppänen et al. 2014, Androutsopoulos & Juffermans 2014; Leppänen & Kytölä 2016; Leppänen et al. 2017). Indeed, writing about difference and processes of (dis)identification is a key issue arising in the sociolinguistic study of digital participatory media. In football discourse at large, institutionalized mainstream media channel more ‘official’ voices of journalists, associations, or clubs; while they, too, can be highly diverse and controversial, they are regulated by a degree of jurisdiction, ethics and policy. For example, overtly racist discourses no longer acquire prominent places in newspapers or on television, or in clubs’ or associations’ official publicity platforms; only reported, mediated, second-hand racist discourses are likely to occur.

In contrast, multi-authored digital social media (participatory Web; 'Web 2.0') have generally lower degree of administration, moderation, policy or need to appear politically correct, offering affordances to the display and debate of the multiple voices of fans, supporters, or followers. Due to their apparent 'democracy' (i.e., anyone with an internet connection can participate) and often relatively unharnessed freedom of speech, social media have become key formats in discursive debates of society and sports. They are relatively free from some of the normativities of institutional and professional media discourses, and thus open a useful window to popular beliefs and representations on sensitive issues such as race, ethnicity and difference. Discourse about any topic, here football in particular, thus circulates around the world in increasingly rapid, effective and accessible ways. These 'texts' (in a broad sense) go around in an array of modes, modalities, formats and technologies; they are increasingly multisemiotic in nature, and multi-authored to a greater extent than before. Digital multi-authored 'grassroots' media of the 21st century key to football discussions include web forums, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and later, applications 'native' to mobile phones (e.g. Instagram, Pinterest).

As outlined in the superdiversity research in the past decade, the social, cultural and demographic conditions of nation states, particularly in Europe, have caused a significant increase in the categories of migrants, their patterns and itineraries of migration, and processes of integration in the host societies (Blommaert & Rampton 2011: 1; see also Creese & Blackledge 2010). Scholars on superdiversity have noted the co-occurrence of new migration and mobility patterns (or lack of 'patterns' therein) with the emergence of new information technologies, and flows of digitally mediated text via various kinds of computers and mobile devices; however, few have so far systematically analysed empirical work linking superdiversity and new forms of digital communication (but see Leppänen et al. 2014, Leppänen et al. 2017; Androutsopoulos & Juffermans 2014).

Digital, participatory media play a part in making mobilities, ethnic diversification and intersectionality of new identities even more complex and diverse. However, this focus should not underestimate the impact of 'traditional' media; newspapers, television, the radio and the like still play a role in the construction and reproduction of stereotypes, racism (mostly covert) and prejudice. Despite the steadily growing influence of anti-racist ethos and activities in European football, stereotype-saturated discourses about different races and ethnicities in football persist and get media exposure, albeit less than before. In the sociology of football, Giulianotti (1999: 162–163) summarizes similar cases of high-profile football characters caught with overt or covert racist talk in the media (in contexts of England, Wales, Scotland, Sweden, South Africa, and a Dutchman coaching Nigeria). Similarly in the Finnish context, my larger research dataset includes cases where distinguished Finnish football coaches, Jyrki Heliskoski and Juha Malinen, have been repeatedly 'caught in the act' of uttering or writing comments and arguments that received wide media attention due to their perceived racist undertones. However,

especially Malinen has hedged his controversial quotes with anti-racist statements and claims on his international, cosmopolitan, tolerant life trajectory and his many international friends – one form of the versatile “I am not a racist, but...” counter-argument well known in popular and scholarly discussions of everyday and structural racism. Yet such repeated comments that have given impetus to accusations of racism are an example of the complexities and ambiguities of the issue in the time of ethnic diversification of Finland, and that of European football at large.

The era of superdiversity: mobilities in football and the ambivalence of discourses of Africa(n-ness)

Football has been a global sport from its humble origins (Giulianotti 1999; Giulianotti & Robertson 2009). The mobility of professional football players (or those aspiring to be professional) has surged since the fall of the Iron Curtain and the subsequent socio-political changes in the European, and indeed the global context. There have been particularly remarkable migration patterns from ‘Third World’ to the more affluent First World; for instance from Sub-Saharan/‘Black’ Africa to Europe. Players from various African origins have made the itinerary, typically via agents of varying reputability, to European destinations in search for a contract and regular income (Giulianotti 2016: 208–228; King 2011). This development is also true with Finland, a corner of Europe rather peripheral both geographically and in relation to football culture. In Finland, the most common African countries of origin of male football players are Zambia, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Ghana. Importantly, there have also been a number of players from North Africa as well as white South Africans, which makes popular connotations and connections between ethnicity, skin colour and country or continent of origin more complex.

From the point of view of sociolinguistics, the developments described mean that there is an increasing amount of talk and writing (discourse) about Africans, or the ‘African-ness’ of individual players, in the Finnish football context. The discourses range from the celebration, even social emancipation of Africans in football, to the stigmatization and sanctioning of, or strong forms of disidentification with, African players. On the level of metapragmatics (see Kytölä 2013; Blommaert & Rampton 2011), moreover, there is talk (writing, discourse) about how we should (or should not) discuss Africans in Finnish football. Questions we can ask in the era of superdiversity include: How is the Other (e.g. Africa) represented in everyday discourses as a socio-cultural entity? How are foreign (African) actors-in-the-field (particularly players) represented? What are the dialectics and continuum between racism, anti-racism and race-neutrality like? With a relatively thin history of late modern immigration, a superficial understanding of a monolithic ‘Africa’ prevails in Finland, which can be harmful to African-European relations (Rastas

2014)², an important geopolitical axis in the contemporary world of globalization, mobility, prejudice and inequalities (see e.g. Blommaert 2010). In essence, the social change facing 21st-century Europe and the domain of football brings people dealing with football in some role to cope with the increasing and complicated diversity brought by the mobility of football-related people, as well as the changing role of Africans in the global constellation of football. Another motive for research into the topic is the existing prejudice and lack of information about such multiculturalism; this is particularly evident for African football(ers), as Africa–North relations are often still seen as monolithic, essentialistic and superficial (Rastas 2014; King 2011; see also Lowe 2005 for a historical take). A good example on the combination of academic scholarship and media coverage of these issues is the website “Football is a Country”, an offshoot of the larger website “Africa is a Country”³, that has the irony of essentialism embedded already in its title.

One subset of data I have deployed is on representations of Africa, particularly South Africa, during and around World Cup in June–July 2010, the first adults’ World Cup in the African continent. The mass event, since the selection of South Africa as competition hosts in 2004, triggered many emancipatory, positive discourses (“yes, they can”) about the inclusion of Africa. However, also patronising, Western ethnocentric discourses of the World Cup emerged before, during and after the event. Other examples include the racist discourses of the two coaches Heliskoski and Malinen (see above) as well as their reception in (social) media. In contrast, there are also cases where African actors-in-the-field clearly acquired the villain’s role in the bigger narrative of Finnish football. For example, there was a major betting fraud scandal in the northern Finnish town of Rovaniemi, 2011, involving several Zambian players, many of which had acquired the status of local heroes before the scandal (see e.g. *The Guardian* 2011 for coverage in English). In the current (ca. 2015–16) climate of mass hostility towards immigration from the Third World to Europe, researching such fraudulent cases may not seem like a politically correct research focus, especially if the applied aim of research is to build bridges and add to mutual understandings. However, for a fuller picture of the complexity of mobilities, migrations and diversities in contemporary football, also criminal and fraudulent activities should be included in any holistic research.

A Sierra Leonean in Finland: case ‘Medo’ as a source of ambivalent football discourse in the era of superdiversity

The empirical research data used for this chapter comes from a much larger study of media texts of foreign players, difference and diversity in Finland-related football culture,

² A project curated by Rastas, a collaborated exhibition in 2015 in the Finnish Labour Museum, Tampere, on the African presence in Finland, had sports as one subtheme, including African footballers in Finland. See, e.g. { HYPERLINK “<http://www.uta.fi/iasr/news.html?id=106219>” } (accessed 30 January 2017).

³ Located at { HYPERLINK “<http://africasacountry.com/category/football-is-a-country/>” } and { HYPERLINK “<http://africasacountry.com/about/>” }, respectively. Both sites also maintain Facebook and Twitter presence; see { HYPERLINK “<https://www.facebook.com/FootballIsACountry/>” } and { HYPERLINK “<https://twitter.com/futbolsacountry>” } (all url addresses accessed 30 January 2017).

with lines of comparison to similar issues elsewhere (see Kytölä 2013, 2017). Insights accrued from this kind of (mainly qualitative) research are needed, as Europeans' (also Finns') future involves increasing globalization, mobility and multiculturalism, and this is readily observable and very tangible in transnational, socio-cultural domains such as football. Finland was ethno-culturally relatively homogeneous for the most part of the 20th century, albeit with two official languages, Swedish speakers comprising fewer than 10 % of the population. However, Finland has faced remarkable ethnic diversification of the population since the late 1980s (see Statistics Finland 2015 for a numerical overview). In this vignette, I draw on a case which illustrates how the ambivalence of 'New Finns' in the Finnish football scenes has elicited ambivalent debates and discussions of who counts as a Finn in a changing, diversifying Finnish society (Kytölä 2017).

As a selection from a larger data pool on media debates and discussions on the diversification of European football with a specific focus on Africa(n-ness), I now turn to the trajectories of Sierra Leonean-origin adolescent footballers in Finland, who sought asylum while participating in youth World Cup in Finland. In 2003, the Under 17-year old boys' World Cup was held in four major cities in the south of Finland; players born in 1986 or later were eligible to participate. This World Cup was the first one ever in the U17 category that Sierra Leone qualified for, and the team performed impressively, including a draw against the Spain team full of future superstars. After the first stage (group stage) of the competition, however, Sierra Leone were eliminated. Out of approximately 25 members of the Sierra Leone delegation, 14 left the training centre (or the hotel) in the city of Lahti and did not make it to Helsinki international airport for their return flight home. Instead, they (twelve players and two crew members) applied for asylum, as the circumstances at home were still potentially unstable right after the Civil War, 1991–2002 (see Richards 1997; Nousiainen 2003). Some of the twelve players stayed in Finland, others returned to Sierra Leone, yet others continued transnational mobility around the world. Many of the then top talent players stayed in football: some with success and a string of professional contracts, others less prominent (for more, see Nousiainen 2003; YLE 2012).

Players from the youth team made it to (semi-)professional football in Finland and Sweden, while many returned to their home country torn apart by the Civil War. Of that team, one player in particular, Mohammed "Medo" Kamara (b. 1987, henceforth 'Medo') has built a successful career as a professional footballer, and his trajectory illustrates certain aspects of football, globalization, mobility, and superdiversity. Medo stayed in Finland in 2003 and secured a contract in Veikkausliiga, the highest tier of Finnish club football, in 2006. His fifth and last season in Veikkausliiga brought him the nomination Player of the Year in the league. In 2010, Medo signed a more lucrative professional contract with Partizan Belgrade (Serbia), and in 2013, with Bolton Wanderers (England Championship; i.e., the second highest tier). From Bolton, he moved in 2015 to Israel (Maccabi Haifa), and in 2016, back to his Finnish club HJK (Helsinki). (In August 2016,

Medo suddenly moved from Helsinki to Kuwait to play for Al Kuwait SC – in all likelihood a lucrative move – but this latest episode is outside my focus here.)

Along the way, as Medo moved from a country to another, his mobile trajectory and career moves became topics of discussion and debate; i.e., *discourse* in institutional media and in the participatory Web in Finland-based, Sierra Leonean, Serbian, British and Israeli (and Kuwaiti, etc.) media. Whereas Medo's professional career so far is by no means exceptional for a professional footballer – most players and coaches have more or less mobile careers – the case of media coverage and debates about Medo is an illustrative case of sociolinguistics of globalization in that it is moving target, a life in motion, which triggers fluxes and motions of discourse, too (Blommaert 2010; Blommaert & Rampton 2011). This phenomenon is intuitively rather obvious, easy to grasp in everyday terms, but a closer analysis of the multimodal chains of meaning-making in the different stages of the discourses on him reveals some complexities. For instance, during his years as a football professional in four countries (excluding Sierra Leone), his trajectory became a topic of interest in football media, websites such as the hegemonic fact source Transfermarkt⁴, blog entries, numerous discussion forums, the free encyclopaedia *Wikipedia* (where, as of 1 June 2016, there is an entry on Medo in nine languages, including Serbian⁵ and Hebrew), and subsequently, newer formats of the participatory Web: for example, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Medo's club football career aside, his case becomes yet more complex due to his dual nationality, and hence his dual eligibility to represent the football federation of either one of his two home countries. Medo acquired Finnish nationality in 2010, but was ultimately denied eligibility for Finland men's team after a long petition process between FIFA and the Finnish Football Federation (Palloliitto 2010). In 2011, at the age of 24, Medo was finally selected for the only men's national team he was eligible for, Sierra Leone (Bittar 2011). Because of his great competence and potential, many of the Finland-based discussions on Medo's career discuss the possibility of Medo appearing for Finland national team after first getting the Finnish citizenship.

Out of various media coverages and discussions on Medo, I discuss below two short vignettes from the Finnish Futisforum2 (Kytölä 2012, 2013; Kytölä & Westinen 2015). Although I acknowledge the visual and multimodal affordances of web forums, for practical reasons I will include below only the English translations of the textual parts. A fuller multisemiotic analysis would include the original Finnish and multilingual visual appearance, layout, colours, emoticons, and so on (see Kytölä 2013).

The first vignette comes from a discussion thread named "Medo Partizanissa - yllättävä suomalaisnimi Mestarien Liigassa 2010-2011" ("Medo in Partizan - a surprising Finnish

⁴ { HYPERLINK "<http://www.transfermarkt.de/medo/profil/spieler/47777>" } (accessed 29 January 2017)

⁵ { HYPERLINK "https://sr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Мохамед_Камара" } (accessed 29 January 2017)

name in the Champions League 2010-2011”).⁶ Due to ethical considerations, I use acronyms for the actual forum nicknames here.

EXAMPLE 1

(starting from the 8th message in the thread)

uh:

A surprising Finnish name? Well, that man with his name is as far from Finnishness as possible, a passport you get as a grown-up does not make you any Finnish at all.

Have luck on the [substitutes] bench, not gonna miss you, you're not mentally strong.

This forum member disidentifies from Medo and Medo's Finnishness proposed in the heading of the discussion thread (cf. Kytölä 2017). At that point, Medo had already acquired Finnish nationality, having lived in Finland for seven years, of which five years in the top league. The next response only laconically suggests that the previous author should direct those messages to *Hommaforum*, the Finnish web forum well known for its hostility to immigration and multiculturalism, even for its downright racism. The next response, however, is wordier:

EXAMPLE 2

ST:

Kamara could still be called Kamara even if he'd lived all his life in Finland. Most of your "real Finns" haven't lived in Finland longer than a fraction of their lives. Should Petri Pasanen or Mika Väyrynen be denied their citizenship when they've lived abroad too long? Get a life, racists.

(Pasanen and Väyrynen are two professional footballers with a very Finnish name and a 'purely' Finnish family background.) This is partly direct, partly indirect metapragmatic disidentification from the racist discourse based on skin colour or ethnic origin. Ironically enough, noted in a rather corny joke before the negative response, Medo's African (probably Mende) surname Kamara happens to be a Finnish word, too, meaning 'the earth's crust' or 'rind'.

The next response – still within seven minutes of the negative one – displays a yet different type of anti-racist, cultural-relativist meta-discourse:

EXAMPLE 3:

V:

[as a direct response to the quote "...a passport you get as a grown-up does not make you any Finnish at all."]

In principle you can think so, but Medo has come to stay in Finland at age 15, and 7 years later, he'd integrated quite brilliantly in Finland and Finnishness. This doesn't erase the fact

⁶ <http://futisforum2.org/index.php?topic=107615.0> (accessed 29 January 2017).

that Medo is more Sierra Leonean than Finnish, but who cares. I'm happy to follow the undertakings of the Finnishized Medo in European arenas 🙌.

This discussion thread continues on Medo's transfer to Belgrade (2010), and later Bolton (2013) and Haifa (2015), until January 2016. Parallel to that thread, which had a peak of activity during the transfer from Helsinki to Belgrade, there was a discussion thread on the same Futisforum2 dedicated to Medo's career in Helsinki. In that thread, together with the complicated issue of Medo's eligibility for Finland national team with his dual citizenship, another aspect of Medo's transnational trajectory is discussed that is of interest to a sociolinguistic inquiry: language choices in communication with Medo.

EXAMPLE 4:

bK:

So why would Medo not be allowed to represent Finland? Fifa's rules are totally incomprehensible. Other blokes can play in U21 teams and then change the country like [Kevin-Prince] Boateng who plays for Ghana [instead of Germany]. Medo has hardly gone to play in Sierra Leone since he stayed in Finland. Btw. The man doesn't speak a word of Finnish, or at least he gives all his interviews in English.

Rv:

Well has he studied Swedish in Finland then?

Otherwise, an urgent complaint on unlawful action by immigration officials. Satisfactory written and oral knowledge of Finnish or Swedish is a prerequisite for citizenship.

DE:

Well Medo does speak Finnish pretty well, his vocabulary is quite broad, but his pronunciation leaves a bit to be desired. I don't think his Finnish knowledge differs from the average immigrant really.

[...]

S:

Yes, Medo understands Finnish, but for practical reasons, gives his interviews in English.

The writer who introduces the language issue and the ones who respond to the message represent differing, ambivalent takes on the issue. On the one hand, an immigrant-background player can be Finnish and not speak Finnish well at the same time. On the other, acquiring nationality presupposes passing the language test (for either Finnish or Swedish).

After that, there is a two days' hiatus in the discussion, which then transforms into a burst of congratulations, farewells and well-wishes when Medo's transfer to Belgrade becomes confirmed in reputable media sources. Finally, before the thread is 'locked' (discontinued by the moderators), one member revigorates the language issue:

EXAMPLE 5

h:

Why the fuck was Medo interviewed in English in his farewell match, and even the letters HJK [the acronym of the club's name] this slut spelled out [pronounced] in Londonese [English]? It felt like Medo was a bit confused...

The (mediated) language choices pertaining to someone from Sierra Leone who has lived seven years in Finland and integrated reasonably well in society because of his athletic abilities and determination become an “off-topic” of discussion in the bigger picture of debates of belonging and (dis)identification. As elsewhere in the world of football, supporters and followers in Finland, too, are facing a new degree of diversity and complexity, be it local, national or international level competitions. Trying to make sense of the new forms of diversity, ethnic diversity in particular, causes tension and ambivalence, and this is manifest on the level of discourse. Recurring discourses and debates circle around: Who counts as a Finn in the flux of migration and mobility, and within the complex regulations of international football federations’ eligibility rules? Who can represent Finland in sports? Who can ‘we’ identify with, feel proud of, celebrate, and so on? Apart from the nationality (technically a binary opposition), Finland and ‘Finnishness’, in sports and otherwise, is also an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991) at the same time. The general ‘mainstream’ ethos in Finnish football, and football at large, is pro-multiculturalism, pro-diversity: it is players’ skills, form and attitude that count, not ethnic origin or skin colour. However, the big national narratives do persist, both in club football (‘the local’) and international football (premised on the idea of nation states and nationality); there is considerable variation in how that big narrative can or should be constructed. The debates and discussions around Medo, a professional footballer with a highly transnational and mobile trajectory, are one example of such complexity and variation.

Concluding discussion

In the above, I have outlined some historical and current trends in discourse about ethnicity and race in football culture, with an empirical focus on Africans/Blacks in European-based football, particularly Finland. Reflecting on the empirical findings against the current debates in the (mostly non-linguistic) sociology of football reviewed earlier, several trends emerge in the current analyses. First, overt and covert racism and discrimination towards Africans in media discourse on football persists, partly enabled by the participatory nature of contemporary (digital) mediascapes. Second, there are also remarkable and varying discourses of anti-racism, often evoked and occurring together with racist discourses. Third, representations of the other, for instance Africa(ns), voiced via digitally mediated participation formats in football discourse are highly diverse, ambivalent and complex.

Acknowledging and critiquing problems and challenges that football faces in the rapidly globalizing world, football can be seen as a potential domain of positive discourses of

ethnic diversity (e.g. Africa(n-ness)). Football is a significant cultural form where historical inequalities and tensions between 'the West' and 'the Third World' (notably Africa) could potentially be alleviated. This can be helped by discourses of heroes and role models (Didier Drogba, Samuel Eto'o, Yaya Touré; or in Finland, Medo), but simultaneously marred by persistent discourses of 'backwardness' ("good talent, but they need European/White tactics and discipline") or discourses of 'short attention span' ("they come and go, cash in and leave"). While questions like the latter two are most often attached to foreigners, 'the Other', particularly Africans, we can also ask: in Late modern football, what players do *not* need tactics and discipline from their mentors in order to succeed? Who does *not* try to get the best possible contract and move on to another location whenever the time is ripe? Despite some cynical recurring discourses, these are by no means characteristics native to 'Black', African (or other Third World) players, but part of life as a mobile football professional in general. African or Black players, regardless of to what extent they are 'native' in their European country of residence, can become highly celebrated if they are good enough. They can also be stigmatized and criticized if they do not succeed well enough in their 'Western destination', or if they show otherwise undesired qualities or behaviour. The history of football knows success stories and failures, celebration and disillusion.

With the growing globalization and (super)diversity of football culture comes the growing tension between the familiar – the unity and shared understandings in global and local football, classifications and categorizations premised on localities and nation states – and the unfamiliar – cultural and social flows, mobility of different people within the domain of football, the unpredictability of new combinations and intersections. This is co-occurring with the mobility and circulation of texts and discourses in ever more unpredictable forms and combinations, often multimodal and digitally mediated. Research on language, superdiversity and sports should focus on the ways in which these flows are multimodally represented and metapragmatically received in daily lives of people living in the middle of them. Although we should not ignore the ways in which the history of football has *always* been multicultural, translocal and global from the start, actors-in-the-field are now more often faced with the question: How to cope with 'the Other' in football culture when 'we' may well need 'the Other' in order to pursue 'our' personal and shared socio-cultural goals?

While the general ethos of respect, benevolence, inclusion and anti-racism among fans, followers, players and associations is now prevalent, there are supporters and followers, and their groups and communities, who are unhappy with the ethnic diversification of football, and would like to keep clubs and teams 'pure' and 'traditional' instead. There are clashes and collisions of ever-changing flows and ethea; discourse and meta-discourse on football and football culture can be deployed as a window to understanding Late Modern forms of superdiversity and social change (cf. the heuristics of *metric*, *mirror*, *motor* and *metaphor* in Giulianotti & Robertson 2009: xii). In addition to academic inquiries in sociolinguistics, discourse studies, sociology of sports and cultural studies, research on

football discourse focused on representations of and debates on ethnicity and race can have an applied societal value. In the Finnish context presented above, for example, general audience and subgroups of Finnish society can benefit from the increased understanding of Finnish–African relations, prejudice and representations. On a European level, football associations and clubs may apply the qualitative knowledge acquired in order to better accommodate African players and other football practitioners entering, and moving within, their new countries of residence. Moreover, institutional media may benefit from research that shows how equal and non-discriminative discourses are presented. Overall, an applied dimension of research into the sociolinguistics of football and ethnicity is to promote equality and increase mutual understanding through the contradictory but highly potential domain of football.

RELATED TOPICS

(a list of chapters in the volume which you expect that readers might find it useful to refer in connection with your article)

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(An article focusing on ‘mediated football’, the interplay between audience reception and media representations in different cultural contexts.)

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