THE SPORT COMPONENT OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH

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National features of modern English speaking cultures are expressly reflected in many idiomatic words and expressions largely based on values related to national sports and games. Sports culture and ethics are an integral part of the culture and mentality of the modern English speaking world including such vastly represented English speaking cultures as Britain, the U.S.A, Canada, and Australia. The factors of relevance and popularity of sport have influenced the formation of a large number of expressive means of the English language, in particular, sports metaphors. This is in large part due to the significant ideological, social, and cultural roles of sport in these societies. Thus, the language of sport is a source of new words, phrases, and imagery for the general English; these expressive means are widely used in literature, mass media, politics, business, advertising as well as in everyday communications.

Keywords: sportiveness, ideology, metaphor, phenomenon, relevant cultures, sports-based imagery, mentality.

All major world varieties and dialects of modern English, including its British, American, Canadian, and Australian versions, demonstrate that the values of sport and related infrastructure are deeply-seated in the character and mentality of these cultures who speak it. This is due to the significant ideological, social and cultural roles that sports activities, sports institutions, and sports values play in the whole of the English-speaking world.

It is true that sports and play are a significant component of any culture in the modern world. Nigel Townsend said, “It is human nature to play and to compete. Peoples of all races and denominations have departed themselves – in a more or less organized manner – for at least as long as there have been written or pictorial records, to serve as evidence to the contemporary historian” [6].

It is also true, that sport in Britain was historically destined to form a socio-cultural activity of its own, and to produce its own language. In turn, the language was borrowed by many other western and world cultures. According to numerous scholars and writers who have looked into the role of sports in Britain, British sports and games are part and parcel of the British character and modern British lifestyle. T. S. Eliot said, “[Popular culture]… is all the characteristic activities of a people: Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, The Twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board...” [2].

The culture of sport influences the general lifestyle of the world English speaking community while the language of sport is a source of new words, phrases and imagery for the general English.

A clear evidence of this phenomenon is a wide use of sports metaphors, based on national and international sports, by native speakers representing various social groups living in the relevant cultures: British, American, Canadian or Australian. Analysis of different types of discourses may lead us to the conclusion that sports related imagery can be used in all kinds of discourses: emotive prose, public speaking, business, military, everyday conversation, advertising, etc.

Some of the factors stimulating the generation of sports-based imagery are the attractiveness and importance of sports values; proximity of such notions as “fair play”, “victory”, “vigor”, “success”, “failure”, etc., which exist in many spheres of human activity in any culture. The marked linguistic activity of sports metaphors, in all major English world dialects, is clearly a phenomenon that can be regarded as a linguistic universal, and underlines the ‘sportive’ culture and mentality of its native speakers.

Sporting British English. If you “bat on a sticky wicke” in Britain you are in “a difficult situation”. No wonder the Duke of Wellington was able to observe that “the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing grounds of Eton”. The skills learned by the child on the playing fields, were translated in those early days into the battles of the adult, and this still runs true today. At these public-private schools, they had to follow the rules of the school and its internal hierarchy, irrespective of title and rank outside the institution. The idea was to “play up and play the game”, i.e. “play your best, but play by the rules” [10].

The notion of sticking to the rules became deeply ingrained in middle class English culture, so much so that it could have tragic consequences. This is illustrated as early as 1825 by the death of Lord Shaftesbury’s fourth son in a fistfight at Eton when he was only 13. Significantly, the Earl refused to take any legal action,
against either the school or his son’s opponent, because the fight had been conducted according to the rules of the day governing fistfights. Pluck or courage, and fair-play, in combination, were the characteristics of the gentlemen, both on the sports ground, and, indeed, in life itself. Winning was not the goal; while competing with honor and upholding team spirit most definitely were. Team sports encouraged adherence to established rules, preparing boys for life as responsible members of society. Certainly, there was an overwhelming tendency to see life, and even war, as a game.

British English reflects these ideas in such idioms as “it isn’t cricket”, “to play fair”, “to play the game”, “rules of the game”, “to play according to rules”, “the ball is in your court”, “to be at bat”, etc., the meanings of which are quite obvious. This agrees very well with the British value of “abiding by the law” and “keeping stiff upper lip” [10].

The tendency of native speakers to use fixed language units, such as sports metaphors, may result in linguistic expressions that are difficult to decode by international speakers. This is certainly true with English.

Sporting American English. Nobody would argue the role that sports play in American life. “America is business,” as they say, especially big business, as it fits philosophically with the widely accepted American dream of open competition and a free market economy. Americans believe in competition, foster it, and encourage it. They live by its rules. No wonder the language of athletic competition has found its way as metaphor into every aspect of American life. If Americans are at a disadvantage, they say, “we’ve got two strikes against one”; also, things like “the ball has taken a bad bounce”, or somebody is “on the ropes”. If somebody is aggressive, this person “takes a ball and runs with it”, “takes the ball by the horns”, “comes out swinging” or “makes a sweep”. If the fates still conspire against Americans, they “take it on the chin”, “throw in the towel”, or “roll with the punches” until they are “saved by the bell” [10].

It is worth taking some time to think about how sports metaphors, so ubiquitous and so ignored, until Watergate brought them to our attention, describe the unfamiliar or difficult concepts, in terms of familiar images.

Recently, they have also reflected certain changes in the American self-identity. Americans seem to have changed dramatically from a society in which “it isn’t whether you win or lose, but how you play the game”, to one in which to use Vince Lombardi’s words, “winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing”! And the sports metaphors have changed with their attitudes. “The good fight” and “the old college try” have given way to the more sophisticated “game plan”, “play-calling”, and “quarterback” rhetoric, following some dramatic events in American history like Vietnam and Watergate.

To be sure, references to sports in everyday American speech starts early – young students are told to “go for the gold”. Of course, their parents and teachers are not insisting that they become an Olympic athlete, but just to put forth their best effort in the task at hand.

Sports metaphors now often function as public doublespeak: language, which is meant to manipulate its audience unconsciously. Analyzing sports doublespeak reveals some scary truths how Americans values. When undertaking any sort of venture, a good piece of American advice could be to “come out swinging” – a reference to the beginning of a boxing match; in short, this piece of advice tells the person to quickly or preemptively take on a task. In another context, it could mean that one person should ardently defend his beliefs. In John Mitchell’s words, “when the going gets tough, the tough gets going” and Americans turn out to be a society in which “nice guys finish last” and everybody wants to be “on the winning side”.

The rhetoric of the playing field appears in advertising, business and government. Let us take first an obvious example. President Ford in publicizing his economic strategies when he first took office devised the W.I.N. button. An offshoot of Ford’s other unfortunate sport metaphor, the promise “to hold the line” on inflation, the W.I.N button was meant to appeal by familiarity to the sports-minded American who “will get up for the game”, and “tackle the job” if the “coach” just tells him what to do. Ford hoped that the “win” mentality was so strongly ingrained that the very word would alter attitudes and behavior.

With the W.I.N. button, Ford hoped to make use of sport metaphor the way advertising does. He wanted to make analogy about athletic success and success in other fields. Americans all expect to be ‘addressed and seduced’ by advertising, so it is no surprise to see professional athletes advertising hair tonic, shaving cream, even frozen pizza or panty hose. The doublespeak is implicit: use this product, and you will enjoy the same success as Frank Gifford, Arthur Ashe, or Joe Namath. Associating the athlete with the product, however, makes another claim for the athlete. It extends his expertise beyond the playing field. Advertising agencies hope Americans will take the advice of these “pros”, about shaving cream, hair tonic, frozen pizza, or panty hose. After all, the pro would not give advice about these products any more than s/he would throw the ball away at a crucial moment of the game. So the athlete is an expert, as well as a hero. His ability to “score” carries over into financial and sexual arenas as well. There is even a product named: “Score!”
Since it has been established by the advertised message that the athlete is both hero and expert, sport metaphors are used more subtly to sell products. In the MGB ad that reads ‘MGB,’ Think of it as a well-coordinated athlete. We can see how much athletic ability is admired. No longer do we compare the good athlete or the good team to a well-oiled machine; now we’re comparing the machine to the good athlete. Like a well-coordinated athlete, you’ll “score” in your MGB.

But advertising is an easy target for doublespeak analysis. More complex by far is the way sport metaphors function in business, where their analysis leads to crucial revelations about American ethics. Business has always been fond of football analogy, as William A. Whyte points out. “No figure of speech is a tenth as seductive to the businessman. Just why this should be – baseball curiously is much less used – is generally explained by its adaptability to all sorts of situations. Furthermore, the football analogy is satisfying. It is bounded by two goal lines and is thus finite. There is always a solution. And that is what makes it so often treacherous” [7].

Business uses the team philosophy, says Whyte, to hedge on moral issues [7]. By making analogies to sports, it convinces the outside world that decisions are not truly consequential; that they are only “games” executed by good “team players”. The fact that dollars and human lives may also be involved is avoided when the sport metaphor is used, as the sport metaphor imposes automatic limits on the way that the subject matter is seen.

Contemporary American politics has not escaped the tendency to immerse itself in sport-related idioms. “In-fighting” originally referred to the situation in which two boxers fight within close proximity together – today, the term refers to stark competition and a lack of cooperation between members of the same political faction (usually arguments over some issue between Republicans or between Democrats). Sticking with the theme of boxing, a candidate facing intense defamation in the public sphere (i.e., political ads attempting to defame said candidate) can be advised to “roll with the punches” – to deal these ‘blows’ in an attempt to be victorious at a later time. Of course, these boxing metaphors can be applied to other areas (average people, in hard economic times, for example, can “roll with the punches”). In short, the prevalence of sporting metaphors reveals some more general understanding of the American approach to how one should think about his or her goals and aspirations.

The goal of sport activity is always unambiguous and non-controversial. The participants do not come together to discuss or debate the ends for which the activity has been established, but rather take this end for granted. They apply themselves in a single-minded fashion to the task of developing the most efficient means to achieve the predetermined unchanging and non-controversial end: winning.

So the sport metaphor precludes thought; it operates on unconscious and irrational levels, manipulating its users as well as its audiences. Perhaps its use in business, where the idea of competition in the free marketplace still carries moral force, has something to do with man’s aggressive nature. What sport and business have in common, allows the sport metaphor to be drawn so often and so successfully by American entrepreneurs. Sports are an acceptable form of releasing aggressive impulses; if business uses the sport metaphor, isn’t the aggressiveness of business automatically acceptable?

Anthony Storr said, “Some aggressive impulse, which can lead to strife and violence also underlies man’s urge to independence and achievement. Just as a child could not possibly grow up into an independent adult if it were not aggressive, so an adult must need continue to express at least part of his aggressive potential if he is to maintain his own autonomy”[5, p. 59]. Cf.: “to play station to station” to play or act in a methodical way (AmE).

Sporting Canadian English, “Hit them with your hockey!” this coach’s advice to his players suggests that prowess rather than fists might win the game (Can.E).

Jim Proudfoot, a Canadian journalist of “The Toronto Star” said, “Our language is constantly changing. Many new words or expressions have been adopted from sports. These words are initially classed as slang, which is very informal language” [4].

Baseball has enriched the language of North America. Most Canadians or Americans regularly employ expressions, often without even realizing it, which have been taken directly from baseball. In almost every case, these words and phrases have become part of everyday conversation because they express so clearly what the speaker is attempting to say [11].

It was no trouble at all to compile overwhelming evidence in support of the above claims – or to back them up, to borrow from baseball lingo.

A friend invites you to lunch. You are tied up on the day mentioned, but you say: “I’ll take a rain-check on that”. That is from baseball. When a game is cancelled because of wet weather, spectators are given stubs entitling them to admission on some future date.

“You’re on deck”, meaning your turn is coming right up. In baseball, the man on deck is due to bat next.

“A screwball” is a zany character. In baseball, it’s one of the most unpredictable pitches, apt to dip or curve in unexpected ways.
You will hear a person say, “He threw me a real curve”. That means somebody has behaved confusingly, like a pitch’s curve ball that looks like one thing and turns into something else, causing embarrassment for the person trying to react to it.

“Out of left field”. An especially bizarre idea is described as being ‘way out in left field, isn’t it? Even a person can be said to be ‘way out in left field. And a poor seat for any event is in that same remote area.

When a fellow is termed a “real foul ball”, don’t you know precisely what’s being conveyed?

Originally, the pinch-hitter was the player who went up to bat for an inferior hitter in a critical situation. Today, if even a statesman or a baritone can’t go to bat for an inferior hitter in a critical situation. Prince Charles can “pinch-hit” for the Queen.

By the same token, if a person ‘goes to bat’ for another, it is because he presumably can speak or act with greater effect that the one he’s replacing.

“A doubleheader” isn’t only a pair of baseball games, played in a quick succession by the same teams; the word can describe almost any activity that’s repeated immediately.

When you are “in the ball game”, you are directly involved in what is going on. You are competing and taking part; your mind isn’t wandering and you haven’t been excluded from proceedings.

When somebody “plays ball”, he is cooperating, right?

“A ballpark figure” or a number that’s “in the ballpark” is an estimate so close to being accurate that, like a hit that does not go over the fence, it can be played.

When a ball is hit to the shortstop, say, another player gets behind him in case he misses. He is “backing up” his teammate. People today in every walk of life are “backed up” at crucial moments.

Similarly, “the backstops” prevents the costly loss of balls, which may have eluded the catcher – have gone by the last man. You have used that term, too.

A player who struck “a home run” still must touch all the bases before scoring. If he does not he can be thrown out at the one he missed and the whole enterprise will be wasted. Entrepreneurs these days know the importance of “touching all the bases”.

And when a fellow checks with a colleague, doesn’t he say he’s “touching base”?

Furthermore, it is always embarrassing, either in baseball or daily life, to be “caught off base”, isn’t it? And a fellow who’s badly mistaken is “way off base” isn’t he?

Anybody who is left-handed is “a southpaw”, even a violinist. The designation came from baseball. In many parks, like Exhibition Stadium, the left-handed pitcher delivers his throws from the south.

“Change of pace”. Pitchers were the first people to indulge in a change of pace. It meant they could toss balls at varying speeds and would fool hitters with surprise slow toss after a certain velocity had become familiar. Today, a person “changes pace” when he alters his routine. It is usually for his own benefit and not intended to delude.

“You put one over” when you succeed with a bit of trickery. Originally, it was a pitcher getting a dangerous throw past the batsman.

“The bullpen” is that section of the stadium where relief pitchers await word they are needed, and also refers to a roster of such athletes. The expression can now refer to reserve personnel of any kind.

“A box score” is the statistical summary of what happened during a baseball game but the term now denotes any set of statistics compiled in convenient form.

“The farm system” was invented in baseball. A major league club would maintain its own set of teams at lesser competitive levels and use them to develop a steady flow of fresh, trained personnel. These days, almost any business can operate a farm system for the same general purpose.

The bat can slip out of the hands of a hitter who’s “lost his grip”, often with serious results. A lot of people are losing their grip these days.

What’s a pitch? It’s what the pitcher offers the man at bat and once it’s on its way, he can only hope it works. In 1978, “a pitch” is what a salesman aims at a customer, what an advertiser puts before the public and what a fellow might attempt on a Friday evening at a disco.

Saturday morning, when that person reports that he “struck out”, is there any doubt about what’s he’s telling you? [11]

Sporting Australian English. If you “bet on the bush basis” in Australia you behave in a reckless, thoughtless manner.

If you “get off your bike” you lose your temper. If something is “home and hosed” then it is “the result, which is a foregone conclusion or an easy winner”.

To study the phenomenon of sport metaphor in different variants of English from both linguistic and cultural aspects is to understand the people living in these cultures better and to communicate with them more effectively. The research and the data available may also have potential implications for ELT with regard to specific culture bound imagery, which modern native speakers and writers of English resort to as well as to ways of handling fixed phrases in the act of communication. The development of near native communicative competence presupposes the attainment of such ability.
REFERENCES


Received 30.01.2017.