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SPORTS COMMENTARY AS SPONTANEOUS DISCOURSE GENRE: A PRAGMALINGUISTIC APPROACH



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Abstract

The research is devoted to the analysis of the speech behavior of male and female sports commentators. The methodological basis of the study is a pragmalinguistic experiment with elements of modified content analysis. The study was conducted within the framework of Implicit Pragmalinguistics according to two implicit speech strategies: "Participation / non-participation of communicants in a speech event" and "Formation of the recipient's attitude toward the speech event through evaluation". The study will be useful for translators and interpreters for understanding that they should minimize their own interference while working with commentators' speeches so that addressees see the addressers' intention, and not the translator's individuality.

Keywords: *pragmalinguistics, pragmalinguistic experiment, speech behavior, speech strategy, sports commentary, addresser, addressee*

The goal of the article is to show an Implicit Pragmalinguistic experiment as a current approach to translation and interpreting of live speech as "translators should minimize their interference so that readers see the author's intention, and not the translator's individuality" (Zyubina, 2025, p. 35). «Pragmalinguistics is a branch of linguistics that studies the use of language in real communicative situations, taking into account the goals, motives, and impact on the addressee. Unlike traditional linguistics, which focuses on the structure of language, pragmalinguistics views language as a tool for interaction among people. It arose as a response to the need to study the "human factor" in language, that is, how native speakers choose language tools to achieve specific communicative goals» (*idem*, p. 29). It should be noted that "Pragmalinguistics is divided into two main areas: 1) functional pragmalinguistics that studies the conscious use of linguistic means to achieve communicative goals; 2) implicit pragmalinguistics – studies unconscious, automated speech habits and their influence on communication" (*idem*, p. 29). Pragmalinguistics is a branch of pragmatics that studies the linguistic connection

between speech grammatical constructions and an interpreter of a given text (Matveeva & Zyubina, 2016, p. 64). Pragmalinguistics is divided into functional and implicit, depending on the overt or covert intention of the speaker to convey a message to the recipient through deliberate lexical devices or habitual, unconscious grammatical constructions. Pragmalinguistics distinguishes between emotive and conative strategies, which emphasize either the speaker or the recipient. This research is conducted according to Implicit Pragmalinguistics.

The material of the study is texts of speeches made by 10 Russian-speaking sports commentators, presented at sporting events between 2018 and 2023. Sports commentary is an ideal model for studying oral speech, as it is typically spontaneous and subjective. This is an important component of the implicit pragmalinguistics experiment, as it focuses on the speech behavior of participants and provides an analysis of the actual use of the language in specific communication situations. To conduct a pragmalinguistic analysis and compare the individual behavior of the communicators, we selected the most sought-after male and female sports commentators.

Considering the differences between everyday life and dramatic interpretation, American scholars suggest that the work of a sports commentator can be viewed as the postdramatic work of a living artist and theater creator. According to research on sports commentators (Quy Khuong & Huu Thuan, 2023), when rethinking the position from a postdramatic theatrical perspective, the mechanism of sports commentary can be viewed as theatrical. It should be noted that a sports commentator can also find themselves in the role of a sports journalist, as they are required to point out certain facts about the sports industry, cover the biographies of athletes, and sometimes information from the fields of economics, politics, and other institutional discourses when commenting. Sports discourse is characterized by its openness and interaction with other institutional discourses, especially with the mass media. It exists in various forms, including sporting events, sports commentary, and live broadcasts. The speech of a sports commentator varies depending on the tension of the sporting event; the verbal behavior of a sports commentator contains elements of expression and the use of relevant terminology.

Pragmalinguistic analysis for diagnosing the individual personality traits of the addresser is conducted according to the methodology of G.G. Matveeva (Matveeva, 1993). The analysis involves identifying emotive and conative speech signals in the text and their subsequent analysis. The results of the analysis are recorded in tables and used to create a fragment of the author's speech portrait.

The sports commentators' speech behavior is analyzed according to two speech strategies: the emotive-focused "Participation/non-participation of communicants in a speech event" and the conative-focused "Formation of the recipient's attitude toward the speech event through evaluation." These strategies were chosen to identify the speakers' personal orientation (individualism/cooperation) and determine the influence of commentators on the formation of recipients' attitudes toward the speech event (positive/negative).

The speech strategy "Participation/non-participation of communicants in a speech event" can be expressed in three planes: personal, social, or objective. The

personal plane and its speech signals indicate that only the addresser or addressee participates in the speech event (Zyubina, 2005, p. 166). Determining participation in the social plane requires the presence of both the initiator and the recipient of the communication. The objective plane includes everything that is not in the personal and social planes. In this case, the author refers to the objective side, which does not actualize the participation of communicants in the speech event.

The implicit speech strategy "Formation of the recipient's attitude towards a speech event through evaluation" is actualized in one of three planes: the author's formation of a positive, neutral, or negative attitude toward the speech event in the recipient. In the text, each of the presented planes is actualized with the help of special markers. We consider the explicit and implicit actualization of lexical units as markers of the planes of forming a positive and negative attitude toward the sports commentator's performance in the addressee. Markers of the plane of forming a neutral attitude toward a speech event are the absence of lexical units expressing evaluation (Zyubina, 2005, p. 89). Each minor syntactic group includes the explicit and implicit use of words with positive or negative connotations; the neutral plane is characterized by the absence of a choice of evaluative vocabulary, which allows the recipient to form neutral associations.

Let us consider the results of the pragmalinguistic experiment and compile Table 1: Individual speech behavior of Russian male sports commentators:

Table 1: *Individual Speech Behavior of Male Sports Commentators*

strategy / addresser	Participation/non-participation of communicants in a speech event			Formation of the recipient's attitude towards a speech event through evaluation		
	personal plane, %	social plane, %	subject plane, %	positive, %	negative, %	neutral, %
Guberniev Dmitry	27	24	49	57	13	30
Grishin Alexander	31	19	50	62	6	32
Kazansky Denis	18	13	69	46	34	20
Tikhonov Alexey	30	8	62	48	35	17
Zhurankov Andrey	27	10	63	49	10	41
Average speech genre indicator	26.6	14.8	58.6	52.4	19.6	28

Regarding the speech strategy "Participation/non-participation of communicants in a speech event," which we used in our analysis, the highest personal plane indicator was observed for Alexander Grishin, a figure skating commentator, accounting for 31% of the total number of small syntactic units in his sports commentary at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. The average personal plane indicator among the male sports commentators is 26.6%. Although A. Grishin is not a professional figure skater, his interest and involvement in sports are very high. He often commentates on sports competitions with Alexei Yagudin, an Olympic champion. In this study, Alexander is paired with Alexei Tikhonov. Alexander Grishin enjoys great popularity and affection among viewers, which is why he frequently appears on television. Feeling great confidence in his experience as a commentator and having a good knowledge of the sports industry, A. Grishin repeatedly gives his own assessment, expressing his own opinion, that is why he has the highest personal rating among the group of the Russian male sports commentators: "But that was simply great," "And that's bravo," "which I wanted to shout to the Italian duo" (Grishin, 2022).

It is worth noting that Alexander Grishin's partner, Alexei Tikhonov, has a high personal plane, differing by only 1%. Alexei Tikhonov is a Russian champion, two-time European champion, and world champion in figure skating in the early 2000s. Due to his high professionalism and impressive experience, A. Tikhonov often provides his own assessment of events ("a very respectable performance," "it seemed completely unnecessary to me"). However, we cannot ignore the fact that A. Tikhonov has the lowest social plane – 8%. The genre average for male sports commentators is 14.8%. In our opinion, this is also due to the incredibly extensive experience of the athlete-sports commentator, which manifests itself in the personal assessment of performances at sporting competitions, as well as praise and criticism of figure skaters. The commentary is more self-focused.

In contrast, the highest social impact plane is observed among the universally beloved sports commentator Dmitry Guberniev (24% – a figure that exceeds the genre average by almost 10%). This outstanding television presenter, with extensive experience and over 20 years of experience commentating on biathlon races, was of interest to us for our analysis, as his commentary style clearly emphasizes intimacy with the audience. This can be interpreted as an indication of his closeness with the audience, with the intention of not opposing them but, on the contrary, demonstrating unity with the people, with the Russian nation. His vocabulary is full of inclusive pronouns (for example, "we"). Dmitry Guberniev emphasizes this connection between the athletes, the commentators, and all viewers: "Our biathletes have three bronze medals," "We need to be in the top four in the semifinals" (Guberniev, 2022).

Sports commentators can actively express their own opinions, separating themselves from the audience, or, conversely, demonstrate unity with the listener. However, the predominant indicator found across all sports commentators analyzed is the subject plane indicator. The average for genre was 58.6%. Denis Kazansky has the highest indicator at 69%. Denis Kazansky is a leading Russian

sports commentator on hockey and football. Both sports are team sports and involve a large number of players. Accordingly, a commentator must pay attention to the progress of the game, each player in the arena, the coaches, and so on. This sports commentator's analysis focused on a series of hockey matches from the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. In hockey, D. Kazansky paid attention to everything from the stick in the player's hand to the puck flying into the net. This explains why he achieved such a high indicator, significantly different from other commentators. A high subject plane is characteristic of the specific nature of hockey, as a commentator's attention must cover many aspects. It is interesting to note that Denis Kazansky has the lowest personal plane – 18%. This situation is also explained by the specific nature of his chosen sport – hockey, where subject-matter planes command a great deal of attention. Denis speaks objectively about the situation, rarely expressing his own opinions – "then defensive play," "that is, he simplifies through the boards," "he attacks through the glass" (Kazansky, 2023).

The indicators depend largely on the personality of the addressers. For example, Dmitry Guberniev has the lowest subject-matter indicator — 49%. The average speech-genre indicator is 58.6%. Due to his journalistic skills and his vibrant presentation, Dmitry is generally considered to be able to engage viewers by repeatedly and vividly expressing his position, as well as uniting people and connecting himself to the entire Russian nation — this is his primary role as a sports commentator, based on the materials of his commentary. Thus, Dmitry Guberniev has the lowest subject plane, as his sports commentary largely incorporates other aspects, which we analyze from a pragmalinguistic perspective.

Let us move on to the results of the pragmalinguistic experiment on the speech behavior of the female sports commentators and compile Table 2: Individual Speech Behavior of Female Sports Commentators:

Table 2: *Individual Speech Behavior of Female Sports Commentators*

strategy	Participation/non-participation of communicants in a speech event			Formation of the recipient's attitude towards a speech event through evaluation		
addresser	personal plane, %	social plane, %	subject plane, %	positive, %	negative, %	neutral, %
Bogoslovskaya Olga	26	12	62	58	20	22
Makarova Anna	28	20	52	50	22	28
Petrova Maria	24	8	68	42	25	33
Slutskaya Irina	28	22	50	68	14	18
Tarasova	20	12	68	92	2	6

Tatiana						
Average speech genre indicator	25.2	14.8	60	62	16.6	21.4

An average speech genre indicator for the personal plane of the speech strategy "Participation/non-participation of communicants in a speech event" is 25.2%. The highest and, at the same time, identical scores relative to the speech-genre average are demonstrated by two-time Olympic medalist Irina Slutskaya and Vice President of the Russian Skeleton and Bobsleigh Federation Anna Makarova (28%). Irina is a figure skater with extensive experience, having won medals at the 2002 and 2006 Olympic Games. This explains why I. Slutskaya so often expresses her opinions, provides professional assessments of skaters' technique, and expresses her emotions regarding their performances. Anna Makarova has a strong character, which means she is not afraid to take responsibility and express her opinion.

The lowest personal plane indicator is observed by Tatyana Tarasova, the outstanding and honored coach of the USSR and the Russian Federation, at 20%. Incredibly dedicated to her work, Tatyana Tarasova sincerely supports Russian athletes. Despite her strong character and self-confidence, Tatyana Anatolyevna tries to focus more on the athletes themselves and their skating than on drawing attention to herself. Consequently, Tarasova's subject plane indicator is the highest at 68% (average speech genre indicator – 60%), as she predominantly focuses on the third person.

We see a similar subject plane (68%) in the speech of Maria Petrova, the prominent figure skater and world champion. Maria judges skating strictly, primarily as a professional. She is very precise and attentive to detail, describing every action of skaters on the ice. It is interesting to note that, according to the study, the social plane among the Russian female sports commentators is the lowest (8%) relatively to the average speech genre indicator (14.8%). According to the study, Maria Petrova's commentary style almost does not emphasize unity with the audience.

However, Maria Petrova's colleague, Irina Slutskaya, exhibits a completely opposite tendency in her commentaries. Her social commentary plane (22%) is the highest among the other female participants. Irina Slutskaya has a similarly strong-willed, yet gentle, personality. Her commentary also includes criticism and professional assessments of the performance, but her connection with the audience is stronger. Irina Slutskaya, like Dmitry Guberniev, emphasizes the intention of rallying the audience, uniting people to inspire patriotism ("Well, today we'll see 24 of the world's strongest figure skaters," "We'll be rooting for them and, of course, cheering for our guys") (Slutskaya, 2022).

Let us study the actualization of the strategy "Formation of the recipient's attitude towards a speech event through evaluation." Dmitry Guberniev's attitude toward the events at the races is predominantly positive. According to the second speech strategy, "Formation of the recipient's attitude towards a speech event through evaluation," he has one of the highest rates of forming a positive attitude

in the recipient (57%) compared to the speech genre average (52.4%) ("But be that as it may, our biathletes have three bronze medals," "We're fighting, we're fighting") (Guberniev, 2022). Dmitry Guberniev is an excellent professional, a brilliant journalist, and presenter. He knows how to properly encourage fans, to use the right intonation, and what to emphasize. However, in Dmitry Guberniev's case, portraying the events from a positive perspective is not a pre-planned intention, but rather the commentator's personal attitude toward both his work and the Russian sports industry as a whole. Nevertheless, Alexander Grishin surpassed D. Guberniev in terms of positive attitude formation, with 62%. Alexander Grishin is known for repeatedly praising figure skaters, he is quite positive in his predictions, and he is prone to encouragement despite failures on the ice: "Bravo! Bravo!" (Grishin, 2022). This observation is also supported by the fact that A. Grishin has the lowest negative attitude formation plane, 6% (the average for this genre is 19.6%).

Unlike previous sports commentators, Denis Kazansky's positive attitude formation plane is 46% — the lowest in the table (see Table 1). Hockey is a fairly aggressive sport where it is difficult to keep negative emotions, so D. Kazansky has one of the highest rates of negative attitude formation in the recipient — 34% (the genre average is 19.6%). Alexey Tikhonov outperforms him in this regard. As a professional figure skater, Alexey Tikhonov is good at figure skating technique, so he can be strict with athletes and offer criticism. However, we can confidently say that Alexey certainly does not express indifference toward the event he is commenting on; his comments are emotionally charged, and his neutral attitude plane is 17% (the lowest among male sports commentators; the genre average is 28%). The combination of his positive and negative comments is aimed, in any case, at supporting the Russian athletes. He shows a sense of empathy.

Andrey Zhurankov has the highest neutrality plane (41%; whereas the genre average is 28%). A. Zhurankov is a true champion of Russian figure skating, and he frequently writes controversial articles expressing his opinions on events related to Russian figure skating. Nevertheless, his commentary is gentle, calm, and professional. When commentating, A. Zhurankov refrains from overt emotional outbursts.

Among the women, according to the speech strategy "Formation of the recipient's attitude toward a speech event through evaluation," the highest plane relative to the speech-genre average belongs to the genius of Russian figure skating, Tatyana Tarasova (92%). A true fan of figure skating, in which Russia holds a leading position, T. Tarasova admires the performances of Russian skaters, casting them in the best light: "She skates flawlessly," "Bravo!", "This is magnificent" (Tarasova, 2018). Tatyana Tarasova's negative attitude formation plane is only 2% (the speech-genre average is 16.6%), demonstrating her penchant for expressing positivity as a sports commentator.

The opposite situation can be observed with Tarasova's colleague, a figure skating commentator Maria Petrova. She has the lowest plane for positive attitude formation (42%) and the highest one for negative attitude formation (25%). As we

noted earlier, M. Petrova is a strict commentator who supports domestic athletes, but she restrains herself from offering excessive praise. She is also less lenient with the performances of athletes from other countries, pointing out errors and shortcomings in their programs: "Today they started their program very carefully," "this pair didn't perform two jumping triple elements for us" (Petrova, 2022).

In terms of forming a neutral attitude in the recipient of the text, the most demonstrative indicators are observed for Anna Makarova (28% – the highest plane) and Tatyana Tarasova (6% – the lowest plane). Bobsled and skeleton are typically described using technical equipment and gear needed for these sports, requiring the sports commentator to provide dry, non-emotionally charged facts: "162 kilograms are the minimum weight", "Then he loads the bobsled" (Makarova, 2022). In Tatyana's case, however, this person possesses such character traits as liveliness, excitement, and emotionality, resulting in Tatyana Anatolyevna's speech being quite expressive and emotionally charged.

Thus, in the course of this study, using the objective pragmalinguistic analysis, the individual speech behavior of sports commentators was examined according to two speech communication strategies: "Participation/non-participation of the addresser in a speech event" and "Formation of the recipient's attitude toward a speech event through evaluation." Assessing the individual characteristics of the communicators led to several conclusions. First, sports commentators are highly emotional, expressive, professional, and engaged. They attempt to engage viewers through commentary, arouse their interest in the sporting event, and form a specific opinion regarding the competition. Second, in most cases, the sports commentator is an experienced athlete or professional journalist who has devoted a significant amount of time to the sport in question and also has a good knowledge of the subject. Therefore, a sports commentator who is an athlete will express their own opinion more often than others, as they are more familiar with the correct execution of technical elements. They will emphasize their presence in the commentary, drawing attention to their assessment and their perspective, thus making their comments quite subjective. Some sports commentators feel a close connection with the viewer and repeatedly emphasize their unity with the addressee, drawing attention to the integrity of the sports fan group, portraying the people of one country as a unified force for maintaining the spirit of patriotism. Many sports commentators possess such traits as an ability to support (in this case, the viewer and the athlete), a positive mindset in predicting the outcome of an event, and an expression of love for the sport. Conclusions regarding the speech behavior of the sports commentators are supported by an analysis of their biographical descriptions, comments regarding their personalities on forums, and an analysis of news websites. Undoubtedly, when translating from one language to another, the translator must take into account the actualization of the addresser's speech markers to avoid potential subjectivity and an inadequate conveyance of the author's intentions.

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