

MEDIA DISCOURSES:  
Analysing Media Texts

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# 7

## RACISM AS SOCIAL COGNITION IN SPORTS COMMENTARY

Tonight 25 million viewers will watch a clash that is more than just a football match.

*(Daily Mail, 17 June 2000)*

The analysis of the ‘unsaid’ is sometimes more revealing than the study of what is actually expressed in the text.

*(van Dijk 1991: 144)*

### **Introduction**

The BBC sports commentator John Motson once observed in a BBC Radio Five Live interview that from the commentary box football players are often hard to tell apart. He had a particular problem with black players: ‘There are teams where you have got players who, from a distance, look almost identical. And, of course, with more black players coming into the game, they would not mind me saying that that can be very confusing’ (cited in Boggan 1998). Many people did indeed mind him saying that. For Motson, it was apparent to them, black players tended to look the same when there are lots of them. This is clearly a statement of prejudice, a statement which implies black players are first and foremost blacks, and only second individual sportspeople. This chapter is about such prejudice and the communication of it through the media. However, it will not focus on individuals’ comments, but rather the communicative context within which racism and other forms of prejudice ‘make sense’ in a pernicious manner. For Motson was not communicating any personal attitude towards

black people, nor was he communicating any conscious sense of their difference to white players. Instead, like many media figures, he was drawing upon a common way of seeing people in terms of their difference from white skin within a predominantly white society. The prejudice – literally, in Latin, the pre-judgement – belongs in this view to a whole society. The way of thinking and the way of talking about black players which popped readily into this commentator's head did so precisely because it was socially shared knowledge and therefore readily available as a way of talking about the difficulties of his job. Racism, as it is discussed in this chapter, is social communication.

In particular, the chapter explores the work of a discourse analyst who has spent much of his career studying racism by theorizing prejudice as **social cognition**, Teun van Dijk. Drawing upon artificial intelligence research, he looks for linguistic evidence of ways of storing and recalling information in the mind that take part in socially shared stereotypes and other pre-judgements. Following van Dijk, we can interpret Motson's comment in terms of shared cognitive structures. The structure is within his mind: the statement suggests the speaker mentally lumps black players together, while he sees white players in terms of more individual characteristics. But in calling upon that cognitive categorization in a comment, the speaker asks listeners to recognize their own use of that categorization and to bring that into use in order to understand the comment. Comments such as Motson's, then, reinforce an already existing set of social categorizations, reminding us as listeners that it is unremarkable in British society to see black people's skin colour first and their other characteristics a distant second. A quick thought experiment makes the social nature of the thinking clear. If the commentator had said that teams with too many ginger-haired players were a problem, listeners to the Radio 5 Live interview might have regarded this as a quirky limitation of his, for that is not a widely shared recognition problem. But race-based identification – seeing people's skin colour first and thereby lumping them together – is common and was therefore easily understandable. Such racism is likely to have been further reinforced because it was an authoritative sports figure who voiced it and because it was reproduced to hundreds of thousands of listeners. Van Dijk (1988b: 169) gives particular emphasis to such media racism, citing a number of studies that have found people rely heavily on media accounts for their knowledge, beliefs and opinions about ethnic minorities.

Much of van Dijk's work has been on the reproduction of racism in the news. I will instead use sports coverage, and in particular live sports commentary, to explore the discursive production of racism. This is for a number of reasons. First, sport is deeply related to group identity, whether gender or national or regional identity, and with wider matters of power in society. It can be studied as a 'cultural theatre where the values of the larger society are resonated, dominant

social practices are legitimized, and structural inequalities reproduced' (Sabo and Jansen 1992: 173). Sport, particularly in its interdependent relationship with the media, is an important theatre where who we are, and therefore who we are ethnically, is played out. Second, sports commentary produced live and in the heat of a sports event is likely to contain more unguarded statements, less self-monitoring, and may therefore give a particularly rich description of the shared cognitive structures which van Dijk theorizes. Third, sport claims a populist and apolitical status which many other public genres, full of elite figures and talk, have difficulty doing. It opens up for us aspects of shared social life which official public life can miss. In the terms of Billig et al. (1988), it allows us to study lived ideology as well as the intellectual ideology of coherent systems of discourse and their institutions. But, fourth, sport is also a site of struggle, often pulled into politics, whether it is campaigns to eradicate sectarianism from Scottish football or boycotts of South African sport during the Apartheid era. Precisely because of sport's populist status and its links to national identity, sports commentary is often criticized both by fans and by political figures, and is therefore a kind of talk where much has to be negotiated. Motson, for example, was forced to justify himself on BBC radio the morning after his interview and was roundly criticized for undermining anti-racist education in British football (Latham 1998). To analyse sports coverage is therefore to analyse an important site of society's struggle over issues of what is often termed 'race'.

### The discursive production of 'race'

Discourse analysis is particularly well adapted to understanding the idea of 'race' because it is centrally concerned with meaning as a social activity and with social life as constructed through language. 'Race' fits squarely within these research assumptions, indeed, you could argue that it makes little sense outside them. Genetics can find no empirical evidence for claims that there are well-defined races, and specifically that some different genetic potential among people in different parts of the world leads to differences in terms of cultural categories such as rationality, capacity for hard work and cleanliness. The American Association of Physical Anthropologists released a statement in 1996 rejecting the nineteenth-century scientific study of different races and stating that: 'The peoples of the world today appear to possess equal biological potential for assimilating any human culture. Racist political doctrines find no foundation in scientific knowledge concerning modern or past human populations' (AAPA 1996).

In fact, there seems to be some consensus that about 85 per cent of the total

genetic variation in the human species can be found in any population, and only about 7 per cent can be accounted for by the differences between geographic regions of the world. Thus, 'any given European (or African, Asian, etc.) is genetically far more similar to many Africans, Asians, Native Americans than to some other Europeans' (P.D. Welch 2003). 'Race', as a notion that people with different skin colour are fundamentally different, is clearly an almost entirely cultural category. It is one group's act of making sense of another through gross generalizations about what all the members of that group are like. For this reason it is not separable from the category of ethnicity: the act of saying that all blacks are excessively sexual is more pernicious, but not essentially different, from the act of saying that all Italians are passionate.

Why racism arises, if it has no basis in biology, is a fraught question. It is clear, however, that categorizing others by their skin colour is closely tied to a sense of group identity. Structuralism has proposed that a group's sense of who they are is often more clearly articulated as a sense of who they are not. Thus, Englishness is poorly defined, whereas foreignness or otherness is constantly talked about and reinforced. By constructing an opposition, a cluster of binaries under which 'they' are represented as strange, bad, uncultured, dangerous, childlike, and so on, 'we' can, without it ever being said, see ourselves as the opposite of those terms. Said's (1978) account of Orientalism, a term which implied some unity to a huge swathe of the world's cultures from the Ottoman Turks to the Japanese, is a classic example in western European culture. That construction of otherness, through cultural products from Fry's *Turkish Delight* to Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, is then available for Europeans to make sense of everything from what despots look like to a sense of the exotic. Such categorizations have a history within a colonial past, but are by no means merely historic. J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, with its Central Asian-sounding horror of Azkaban and its Islamic-sounding names for villains such as Salazar, shows that it is alive and well. The Germans are another favourite category for British culture to gather together characteristics against which it defines itself. English football, in particular, is often defined in popular media representations against a German football that merges into German militarism. Germans, as constructed through a century of propaganda, boys' comics and war films, represent a tidy, well-delineated enemy for England. England, in the shadow of that Germany, can find its finest hour. Ferguson (1998) quotes the following call to arms from the tabloid *Daily Mirror*:

'Ve haf vays', 'Filthy Hun', 'You haf been warned'  
England's old enemy, defeated in two World Wars and one World Cup.  
We have decided to teach the Hun a lesson.  
Herr we go again.

The Germans hate being reminded of their failures. Like eating well-matured cheese for breakfast. Or nicking all the sunloungers in the Mediterranean. But what they hate most is being reminded of that glorious day in 1966 when England made them the sourest of sour-krauts.

(*Daily Mirror*, 26 June 1996: 2, cited in Ferguson 1998: 136)

The fact that the German coach, Jürgen Klinsmann, was previously a popular Tottenham Hotspurs player did not change the paper mocking him as ‘Mr Hitman’ (in a reference to the song, ‘Who Do You Think You Are Kidding, Mr Hitler?’). An ethnic discourse sweeps aside other modes of representation in setting up an absolute and simple opposition between ‘them’ and ‘us’.

Racism can be described in terms of a binary between an in-group and an out-group, a structure that is central to the interests of the dominant groups in a society. Scholars have, however, pointed out that people draw upon different categorizations of others in different contexts. Stereotypes are flexible, sometimes there and sometimes not. This is what the *Daily Mirror* was doing with Klinsmann. Ferguson notes that one article contains a reference to him as a ‘former Spurs star’, yet elsewhere he is synonymous with Hitler. Moreover, racism is often much more about the latter half of the ‘us’ and ‘them’ binary, and indeed the ‘us’ category often disappears entirely from sight in discourse (Ballard 2002). While binaries or opposites or contrasts are sometimes deployed, they are one rhetorical tool among a range of ways of talking about ethnic minorities. It might be better, then, to think of racist discourse as a way of deploying ideas of race or nation or ethnicity in certain ways at some times rather than others. It is not so much a fixed them/us binary as a way of talking, a social action that establishes relationships between the speaker and an in-group audience and between that audience and others. Potter and Wetherell (1992) suggest that there are shared ‘interpretative repertoires’ available within a society for talking about particular issues in particular contexts. Racism in this view is all about resources that come easily to hand to explain away a whole host of problems from unemployment to crime to cultural change ostensibly in terms of other people’s characteristics. Potter and Wetherell therefore focus on the ways of talking, particularly the ways of describing and explaining, that people have available to them, rather than on hypothesizing some underlying racist attitude towards outsiders. Racism makes sense of the world for us:

If a researcher really wishes to get to grips with racism then a vital part of their activity must be the investigation of how description and explanation are meshed together and how different kinds of explanations assume different kinds of objects or supply the social world with varying objects.

(Potter and Wetherell 2001: 209)

The category of whiteness is not well defined because it is not used as such an explanatory category. In New Zealand, for example, Maori, Pacific Islands and Asian people often identify themselves and others identify them according to ethnicity, while white New Zealanders often simply call themselves New Zealanders, because the white European culture holds the status as the national culture and there is no social need to assert it. Whiteness elides into New Zealandness, and while it logically exists in a binary relation to ‘other’ ethnicity, it rarely exists socially.

This way of thinking of racism as an action performed through talk has the additional benefit of reminding the critic that at the heart of racism lies the power to define someone else, to make ‘their’ identity in the shadow of ‘ours’. One strategy of anti-racism has been to tackle such definitions overtly – to bring to the surface and to challenge the role that language plays in racism. The label ‘nigger’ used by a young black person to address his or her friends is a strategy to take the words away from a racist white culture, load it with positive in-group identification, and thus reduce a little the racist culture’s power to put down the speaker as black. How far a subculture’s slang can change the meanings of a word for the rest of the language and culture and how long an ironic reappropriation of a word remains radical are debatable (see Cameron 1995).

This way of thinking also reminds the critic not to take racism out of the context of all the other ways of representing with which it is tied up in actual language use. Very rarely are people talked about in derogatory ways simply and only because of their skin colour. The New Zealand television host Paul Holmes called United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan a ‘cheeky darkie’ in a racist dismissal that was part of a wider comment on the UN criticism of the US doctrine of pre-emptive military action (*New Zealand Herald*, 24 September 1993). ‘Race’ was invoked, or to spell it out, the implication that black Africans are cheeky to speak up against the white people who run world affairs, was invoked alongside a whole range of other arguments. Thus, ‘the expression of racism is an integral component of a wider, historical process of racialization which is interlinked with exclusionary practices and with the expression of other forms of exclusionary ideology’ (Miles 1989: 98, see also MacDonald 2003: 53).

### **‘Race’ and the media**

The media are one among many cultural institutions which may reproduce racism. But the forms of representation they reflect are held by many critics to be particularly powerful in perpetuating wider social structures, because they

operate within a claim to speak to and for large groups – the whole country, in the case of many broadcasters – and to reflect an objective reality. Hall writes:

What [the media] ‘produce’ is, precisely, representations of the social world, images, descriptions, explanations and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work. And, amongst other kinds of ideological labour, the media construct for us definitions of what *race* is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the ‘problem of race’ is understood to be.

(cited in MacDonald 2003: 14)

In helping to produce a society’s concept of ‘race’, the media inevitably produce a quite limited set of meanings – in Potter and Wetherell’s terms, a limited interpretative repertoire. Cottle (1999: 193) summarizes 40 years of British criticism on representations of ‘race’ in the media as follows: ‘Across the years and seemingly as a matter of routine, Britain’s black and ethnic minorities have tended to be depicted in terms of a restricted repertoire of representations and within contexts characterized by conflict, controversy and deviance.’ This repertoire has included:

- public health scares;
- muggings and inner-city disorder;
- problems of ‘numbers’;
- attacks on anti-racism campaigns;
- ignoring social inequalities.

Van Dijk has found strikingly similar repertoires in the Dutch media. In one study of the coverage of the arrival of a small number of Tamil asylum-seekers in the 1980s (van Dijk 1988b), he found they were talked about consistently as either having problems (such as being targeted by criminal gangs) or causing problems (such as abusing the Dutch social welfare system). In both ways, they tended to be criminalized by a constant association with deviance, crime, making false asylum claims, drugs and homelessness. In a string of studies, he has consistently found that the media present an ‘ethnic consensus in which the very latitude of opinions and attitudes is quite strictly contained’ (van Dijk 1991: 246).

Sport has been a context where gross generalizations about outsiders using ideas of ‘race’ have been prevalent and tacitly sanctioned as a way of celebrating in-group identity. This is related to its status as an area where ‘overt emotional engagement remains publicly acceptable in ways in which this would be unthinkable in other contexts’ (O’Donnell 1994: 354). Talk about sport is full of passionate statements about who ‘we’ are as a social group which merge into explanations and justifications of why we do or not do well in competitions. It

easily accommodates and perhaps even requires an interpretative repertoire that establishes fundamental differences between categories of people. Major sporting moments, such as Australia's winning of the Americas Cup, often become imbued with in-group significance. Indeed, it is only when people can feel they are coming together as a nation through moments such as the shared watching of a media event that the nation becomes tangible. At these moments authority figures and spokespeople are able to project backwards from them to traditions and well-defined national characteristics that suddenly were 'always there'. 'These stereotypes signify as ethical norms, mobilized to advocate, shape and generate new habits amongst the citizenry' (Rowe et al. 1998: 121). What it means to be part of the nation and what the nation itself means are reinforced through such moments. National characteristics can also be challenged at such moments, particularly in international competitions. When the Chinese athlete Liu Xiang won the men's 110 metre hurdles at the 2004 Olympics, he talked of his victory partly as a challenge to interpretative repertoires in other countries about East Asians: 'My victory has proved that athletes with yellow skin can run as fast as those with black and white skin' (Wang 2004).

At times, the game being played becomes obscured as its symbolic function in performing ethnicity comes to the fore – quite literally, the football game is described without reference to the ball. Studies over a large number of years have shown consistently that television commentators talk differently about black and white players (and more recent studies have looked at similar patterns in coverage of Hispanic and Asian American players). Rainville and McCormick argued in a classic 1970s study of NFL commentary that:

In his description of play, the announcer is building a positive reputation for the white player by more frequently praising him during play, more often depicting him as the aggressor and more often granting him more positive special focus. The announcer is, at the same time, building a negative reputation for the black player by negatively comparing him to other players, making negative references to his past achievements, and depicting him as the recipient of aggression.

(Rainville and McCormick 1977: 24–5)

Other studies (see Davis and Harris 1998, for a review) have found black players talked about by commentators more in terms of the 'brawn' of natural athletes and white players in terms of 'brains' and hard work, of blacks as selfish players and whites as team players. Off the pitch, black sportsmen attract descriptions that draw on a fear of black men as over-sexed and violent (although black sportswomen do not) or descriptions of them as hip or as role models for blacks.

In recent years, such studies have suggested that sport is becoming a place where ‘race’ is seen as a less legitimate categorization, as sports clubs and broadcasters accept a responsibility to produce talk which draws upon different interpretative repertoires. Davis and Harris (1998) cite studies which found that the patterns which Rainville and McCormick (1977) found are no longer so clear-cut. There is also anecdotal evidence. O’Donnell (2003) notes that Scotland’s most popular sports radio programme, *Saturday Super Scoreboard*, cold-shoulders callers who invoke the century-old sectarian rivalry between (Catholic) Celtic and (Protestant) Rangers football clubs. Those who draw on sectarian interpretative resources to discuss the competition between Celtic and Rangers are demoted from being addressed by their first names to ‘caller’, with one informed he was part of ‘the narrow-minded minority in Scotland’ (O’Donnell 2003: 216). The programme positions their contributions outside the shared, acceptable way of talking. However, McCarthy et al. (2003), also studying the UK sports media, found a mixed picture. In their sample of football commentary on the BBC and the Sky Sport channel, black players were, in general, no more likely to be evaluated negatively than white players, or to be commented about in terms of psychological attributes such as determination or skill. They were, however, much more likely to be praised for their physical attributes. Thus, 94 per cent of the commentator remarks about black players’ physical characteristics were positive, and only 6 per cent negative, while 75 per cent of comments on white players’ physical attributes were positive (McCarthy et al. 2003: 226). To the authors, the praise of black physicality suggested a racist ideology at work, but one which could not be expressed openly. They cite Birrell’s (1989: 222) conclusion that such references play a major role in constructing ‘dominant images of racially-defined groups, and thus a major mechanism for the reproduction of racial relations’ (cited in McCarthy et al. 2003: 226).

### Prejudice and social cognition

The content analysis studies cited by Davis and Harris look for racism in the content of talk, and find a number of forms of racism disappearing. But many scholars who study racism are sceptical that this means that those same racist cognitive resources are no longer relevant to social life. Van Dijk (1999) argues that a characteristic of racism today is that it has become less explicit as racism has lost its scientific status and acceptability in public debate, but that ‘inferential’ racism is still a powerful shaping factor in discourse. Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) point out that some interview-based studies in the USA show higher levels of racism in the population than survey-based studies. People may

avow themselves to be not racist, aware of the social opprobrium that those perceived as racists attract, but then immediately afterwards express comments which arguably are racist, such as opposition to ‘mixed-race’ marriages. To reconcile this semantic conflict, they draw on what van Dijk (1999) calls mitigation strategies – statements of the ‘I’m not racist but’ variety. These include constructing discriminatory practices as being for a minority’s ‘own good’, arguing that the practices are fair and not discriminatory, justifying practices in terms of facts (e.g. claims that mixed-race marriages are more likely to lead to divorce) and blaming minorities for their situation.

This racism is therefore harder to identify. However, van Dijk’s semantic theory provides a number of tools to probe inferential racism, that analyse the way statements draw upon shared or background knowledge. Van Dijk argues that all language use is just the visible tip of a large iceberg of implicit world knowledge. Thus the statement denying racism can be unpacked to show racist presuppositions.

Van Dijk provides a full theory and set of analytical terms to discuss how such world knowledge is produced and called up in language use and to point to its use in discriminatory practices. He writes:

Words, clauses and other textual expressions may imply concepts or propositions which may be inferred on the basis of background knowledge. This feature of discourse and communication has important ideological dimensions. The analysis of the ‘unsaid’ is sometimes more revealing than the study of what is actually expressed in the text.

(1991: 144)

There are parallels between this concept of background world knowledge and Potter and Wetherell’s term, ‘interpretative resources’. Both terms describe socially shared ways of thinking and talking, which no one individual needs to claim as expressing his or her personal attitude but which can be easily deployed because ‘everyone’ knows this. However, Potter and Wetherell are closer to conversation analysts (Chapter 6) in focusing much more on the social relations established in talk than on what is happening within individuals’ minds – ‘not on individuals in [social] interchange, but on what is distributed between them’ (Condor and Antaki 1997: 335). They in fact are suspicious of attempts to study memory, perception or emotion by looking for ‘hidden inner processes’ behind people’s words, arguing that ‘psychology is constructed in language’ (Billig 2001: 211–12). Van Dijk, by contrast, aims to understand the socially shared by theorizing the link between knowledge inside our heads and the language we use to share that knowledge. He aims thereby to link cognitive psychology to social and cultural analysis. To do this he draws on a range of forms of analysis, including labelling (Chapter 1) and transitivity analysis (Chapter 3) but also on

an explicitly cognitive theory of the way information is stored and retrieved in the mind, which I discuss briefly below.

Van Dijk focuses upon the ways that the meanings of sentences or utterances are organized into larger structures of sense, which he terms ‘macrostructures’. A single unit of meaning, he suggests, is not remembered by readers, but is reduced down into ‘macropropositions’ or ‘topics’ which the reader is able to store and later remember. ‘Experimental research has repeatedly shown that topics are usually the best recalled information of a text’ (van Dijk 1991: 73). He argues we remember long stretches of information, such as stories, by remembering the gist of the story:

[L]anguage users can summarize fairly complex units of information with one or two sentences, and these sentences are assumed to express the gist, or theme, or the topic of the information. In intuitive terms, such themes or topics organize what is most important in a text. They, indeed, define the ‘upshot’ of what is said or written.

(van Dijk 1985: 74)

He argues that it is often in these larger structures – in the way that verbal material is boiled down into briefer topics – that we find socially shared and prejudicial ways of construing other people.

He developed his analysis of macrostructures in the critique of newspaper discourse (e.g. van Dijk 1988a), arguing that headlines work to sum up stories and attract readers to them because they represent the story reduced down its gist – to a macroproposition or topic. Sub-editors are pre-digesting the story for readers, in other words, doing the reduction of meaning down to a single proposition that readers would do in their heads. Sports commentary does not have headlines. Instead, like the narratives which Labov (1997) describes (see Chapter 4), commentary combines description of action with moments of evaluation, pauses in the action when explanations are made about what is going on and why. It is at these moments of evaluation that we might expect to find the topical statements of the commentary: the sense of what is really going on in the sports event, why the action has happened and what world knowledge is relevant to understanding the game or sports display. Thus, van Dijk provides theoretical justification for the studies of commentators’ evaluations of black and white players discussed above. In van Dijk’s terms, we could interpret the positive physical descriptions of black football players found by McCarthy et al. (2003), first, as a denial of racism. The racism lies in the perception of the black players as defined in terms of their physicality, but that is expressed in positive terms, with the negative corollary, the racist attitude that black players are not characterized by high mental sporting ability, omitted. Second, we could seek to trace the macrostructure at work by working back from the evaluations

(these included ‘very athletic player’, ‘strong in the tackle’, ‘great leaping ability’) to the verbal and visual propositions – the play-by-play commentary and the action on the pitch – that these evaluative comments are seeking to give the gist of.

To trace topical statements back to the propositions they summarize, you would need to watch the games from which the comments came (a fuller analysis of commentary on a game is given in the case study below), so the following analysis is somewhat tentative. Van Dijk (1988a) suggests that material is reduced down to topics by three ‘macro-rules’: deleting, abstracting and generalizing. Thus, a phrase, ‘great leaping ability’, has *deleted* large amounts of information about the player’s action, information such as his leaping to challenge another player for possession of a high ball or other moments of play. The phrase has *abstracted* from the player’s many moments of play this one detail, marking it out as one that represents his playing, and it has *generalized* from actual leaps and their successful outcomes in terms of playing the game to an ability, a general characteristic of the player.

In formulating an evaluative phrase such as this one, the commentator would need to omit many other possible ways of summarizing the player’s actions. In a critical analysis, this moment in analysis is the crucial one, for it is here that we can identify the larger macrostructure or pyramid of meaning, and therefore the ideological dimension to the shaping of understanding. A player praised for his physical prowess is one who is not being praised for his endurance or intellect, although arguably these are just as important elements in the decision to jump and the act of jumping for the ball. The ‘natural ability’ macrostructure appears, from the evidence of analyses such as McCarthy et al. (2003), to be one that is used more frequently for black players than for white ones.

But why should broadcasters reach for processes of summarizing that end up in phrases such as ‘great leaping ability’, and how can they be confident that listeners to their commentary will be able to follow those cognitive processes? Van Dijk argues that summarizing works because people share a large amount of knowledge about the world and about the available ways of making sense of it. He calls this shared knowledge ‘scripts’ and ‘models’. Summarizing information into topics tends to take place along well-worn paths of meaning-making that are signalled to the audience in a few key words. He writes:

Models are mental structures of information that, besides the new information offered in a news report, feature information about such a situation as inferred from general knowledge scripts. Thus, when reading about the ‘riot’ in Handsworth, readers make a model of this particular disturbance on the basis of the information in the news reports, but ‘know’ much more about it than the newspaper now tells them, because they have

more general knowledge about such disturbances or the place where they occur.

(van Dijk 1991: 74)

In van Dijk's news examples, when the journalist uses language such as 'riot' and 'black youths' a small number of cognitive scripts immediately become relevant to the reader to link them together into a model of the current situation. The journalist need not state (and would not need to be conscious of the assumption) that blacks are 'known' to be naturally violent to explain the event, but provides information which makes sense in terms of that script, and omits or downplays information which suggests other factors. In another study, this time of Dutch reporting on Tamil refugees from the Sri Lanka civil war (van Dijk 1988b), he found that the crisis the refugees were escaping from was mentioned in news articles, but was buried, while news headlines, such as 'Thousands of Tamils Smuggled into Country', communicated a sense of large numbers of people arriving in the Netherlands illegally. Van Dijk writes:

A coherent semantic system was construed by the press that happened to be remarkably similar to the prevailing ethnic prejudice [scripts] against all existing minority groups. In other words, the press made it 'easy' for prejudiced readers simply to apply such existing prejudices in their own evaluation of the new immigrants.

(1988b: 185)

Underlying media discourse, then, van Dijk finds ethnic prejudice in the scripts by which they make sense. Further, he argues that such scripts must be present in speakers' and hearers' minds for the language to make coherent sense.

Similarly, in sports commentary, it is no surprise to come across a black sportsman described as physically adept, because we have all seen many such images interpreted in such ways before. Images from Jesse Owens in the 1936 Berlin Olympics to Haile Gebri Selassi, Carl Lewis, Ben Johnson and other black sportsmen in more recent Olympics, to boxer Muhammed Ali and basketballer Michael Jordan, contribute to a script of a 'natural' black male sporting prowess. Scripts of black sporting intellect, endurance or hard work, on the other hand, are much less common. This situation can be accounted for in ideological terms. Van Sterkenburg and Knoppers write that: 'Since (white male) dominance in western societies is usually based on a hierarchy in which mental qualities are valued above physical qualities, this discourse primarily supports the privileged position of many white men' (2004: 303).

The sports commentator, faced with rapidly unfolding events on the pitch, and provided with a ready-made and coherent semantic system by which to make sense of it, is unlikely to reach for other interpretative frameworks. Just as

poststructuralists argue that discourse speaks the subject, van Dijk's cognitive semantics proposes that prejudices can circulate within a society through such headlines and evaluative comments and become reinforced as shared knowledge without anyone claiming ownership of them. We cannot read off the racism of the individual journalist or commentator from the text (Cottle 1999), but we can read off the scripts or system of shared knowledge which underpin the communicative activity of news and commentary.

One criticism of van Dijk is that his analysis of socially shared cognition is limited as a critique of ideology because it reduces it down to structures of ideas. Van Dijk has countered with a book called *Ideology* (1998), but the criticism remains. Montgomery (1999a) argues that van Dijk sees ideology too much in terms of the rational and not enough in terms of people's emotional investment in social practices and the forms of power which bind them together. His view of ideology is a little too voluntaristic, too much about efficient communication, and not enough about power, the formation of identity and other social phenomena. It also suffers from the assumption that people are 'cognitive misers', that is, that they will always reduce information down to its most easily stored form. Billig shows that cognitive psychology's focus on generalizing and categorizing is only half the story (Abell and Stokoe 1999). People also describe things as unique or atypical, remembering a piece of music in relation to one strong experience or years later being able to remember a detail of a childhood scene but nothing of the context. The human mind is, in other words, not a machine.

### Sports talk as the tip of the iceberg

Social cognition is, perhaps, not sufficient as a theory of how power works in society. But a strength of the approach is that it allows analysis to be precise in describing the unstated dimension of communication, to describe the iceberg on the basis of its visible tip. As O'Donnell (1994) notes, stereotypical categorizations of sports figures and teams are characteristically brief references, leaving much to be inferred. He quotes a headline (originally in Castilian) from the Spanish sports daily As:

PANZERS VERSUS ARGENTINA

(As, 8 July 1992)

He states: 'Little effort is required to reconstruct the narrative set in motion in the reader's mind by such a headline' (O'Donnell 1994: 369). Using van Dijk's cognitive semantic analysis, it is possible to describe in more detail what is

going on here. ‘Argentina’ is a straightforwardly abstracted reference to the Argentinean football team which contemporary sports readers would have known was playing in the football World Cup at the time. ‘Panzer’ refers of course to German tanks from World War II, which are clearly not at issue here, and so generalizes from the military efficiency and skill of the Wehrmacht to Germany as a whole. There is an obvious clash between the image of a tank battalion and a football team, suggesting a mismatch at the level of how the two teams regarded and played the game. This might be a witty rhetorical play with our expectations, to be recognized as merely metaphorical, were it not for the consistency with which O’Donnell and other scholars have found German sportspeople represented in this way in other countries’ media. Germans are repeatedly characterized by a military efficiency, controlled aggression and rational calculation, which is implicitly at odds with common scripts of how the game ‘should’ be played. While sports commentary often draws upon military metaphor, German sportspeople frequently attract such language. Bishop and Jaworski (2003) suggest that this kind of sporting reference helps build the nation as a shared experience of history, a sense of looking back collectively on the Germany of World War II (particularly important for countries which fought against Germany). According to O’Donnell (1994: 354), most countries’ teams and sportspeople are represented in such severely limited ways in ‘an astonishing uniformity both within and across national boundaries’, each with its own repertoire of stereotypical attributes.

Part of the power of the *As* headline above is that it stereotypes the German team for the duration of the whole text. However, in van Dijk’s (1991: 76) analysis, the macroproposition is never a single concept, but is a whole clause, the most important and over-arching action of the larger text it is summarizing. So stereotypes do not stand alone, but arise as meaningful resources within this proposition, as topic actors who engage in macropropositions. Similarly, for Bishop and Jaworski (2003), the typification or stereotype does not make sense alone but works the way it does because it also expresses a sense of separation – a rhetoric of ‘us’ and ‘them’ – and a sense of conflict. The *As* headline invokes a stereotyped Germany as it thematizes the whole text in terms of a clash between militarism and the gamesmanship of the Argentineans. We are thus to understand from *As* that what is most important about the game previewed in the article is that it is a battle of Argentina against the German national character.

### **Case study: Latin temperaments v. Third World coaches**

In a brief case study below I analyse some of the evaluative comments in the Eurosport television commentary by Gary Bloom on the 1998 football

World Cup match between Spain and Nigeria (13 June 1998; Nigeria won 3:2) to explore what topics arise in these moments and how they might be analysed within van Dijk's theorization of racist talk. In turn, the pre-match commentary, commentary on players' abilities and comment on the fans are discussed.

The commentary begins with pre-kick-off discussion of the teams, their players and the coaches. Pre-match commentary often sets up expectations for the game, and is therefore important in developing a set of themes about how the game will progress and, implicitly, why. The pre-match commentary below is dominated by two themes: the tactical advantage to Spain of rain and Spain's underachievement. Nigeria is talked about only little, and then in quite limited ways.

Spanish coach Javier Clemente wanted rain for today's match. And how his prayers have been answered. Clemente feels that the Nigerians will be better suited (.) to more humid conditions. and that is hardly what we've got today it's been raining hard when I arrived this morning in this beautiful city (.) and at one stage there were real fears that this game (.) would have to be called off but the good news is that in the last hour the rain has ceased but it's rather overcast and humid now. But the playing surface I think you'll find is very very wet indeed . . .

*[details of the teams omitted]*

Well this man said we want rain. This is what he said yesterday. And as you can see from the Perspex (0.5) which surrounds the dugout there's plenty of it about. Javier Clemente trying to lead Spain to some sort of success at a major championships for the first time (1) Spain have so often underachieved (.) on the international scene (0.5) and yet they have such outstanding players. Now you've probably seen him before [the camera shows the Nigerian coach, with the caption, 'Coach B. Milutinovic']. He's the coach of Nigeria but he's the former national coach of Mexico Costa Rica (0.5) and the USA (2) Luis Enrique kisses his ring for good luck (4) And very shortly we'll be off and running.

Not only the majority of the statements (e.g. 'Clemente wanted rain', 'Enrique kisses his ring for good luck') but also the evaluative, summarizing clauses are about Spain ('Clemente trying to lead Spain to some sort of success'), although the images show both teams. The game, in this commentary, is about the Spanish team, and in particular about the team making good on the natural talent of their players. O'Donnell (1994) notes that southern European teams are often stereotyped as possessing natural talent but lacking discipline. That is not stated, but against the background, which Bloom gives, of Spain's lack of

international success and the talent of its players, it adds coherence to the commentary. Thus, the partly stated topic of the pre-match commentary is a tension between Clemente's coaching and the Latin footballing character.

The Nigerians are described (aside from in reference to the team line-ups, omitted here) in just two ways in the pre-match commentary: in terms of benefiting from humidity and in a jokey aside on their second-hand coach, 'You've probably seen him before.' Although the viewer sees many images of Nigerian players and cheering fans that do not suggest a one-sided game, what she or he hears, and therefore the evaluative discourse by which to make sense of those images, is fairly dismissive of them. The second reference, particularly as it follows a detailed discussion of the Spanish coach's task, remains at the level of a stereotype of Third World countries which can only afford second-hand coaches. Both these references do nothing to build on or amend the script of 'Third World team' which is called up.

As the match begins, two kinds of evaluative comments about players begin to build up. First, the talk about Spanish achievements is continued, in a number of references to the successes and histories of individual Spanish players and their club sides and in references to previous World Cup games involving Spain. Indeed, most of the talk is about the Spanish team, both evaluative and action talk. When Spain has the ball, it is often commented on, and when Nigeria has the ball, there is often silence. In the following, for example, the focus is on the Spanish attack rather than the Nigerian defence:

Good header by Nadal, Raul, Nadal for Spain. Luis Enrique calling for the ball, Raul, Hierro. Oh but it was just behind (.) Hierro who did well to rescue the situation and pick out Ferrer FERRER'S CROSS (1) and Kiko's (.) or rather Raul's header hits (.) the frame of the goal (2) Lovely cross and Raul (.) put (.) the full weight of his body into the header and smacked it into the crossbar (.) and twice now Raul has come close (3) Bit of a let off there for Nigeria.

By contrast, when Nigerian players are on the attack, the focus of attention tends to be shared. Thus commentary explores the topic established in the pre-match commentary of Spain making good on its potential. This is not an over-riding concern. So there are few statements along the lines of 'A patient build-up here by Spain', which directly thematize Spanish play in terms of discipline over individual talent. But the commentary makes sense of the play in terms of the Spanish task.

Second, the commentary focuses a little more on the Spanish when they play well yet focuses more on the Nigerians when they do not. When Spanish players shoot unsuccessfully at goal, they are often putting the Nigerian goalkeeper

under pressure or are coming close to success (as in the example above). When Nigerian players shoot, their shots are often coded as failures. During a replay, the commentator says:

There's that shot again by Ikpeba. I thought that was a poor effort on goal because if Ikpeba could have just held that ball up there for a couple of colleagues to run into the box who knows what might have happened.

A topic of Spanish success clearly shapes the commentary.

The commentator talks differently about Nigerian and Spanish fans. The Spanish are particularized, such as in the image of 'Manolo', a famous, loyal supporter who has banged a large red drum at every Spanish World Cup appearance since 1982. By contrast, the commentator describes Nigerian fans as follows:

A marvellous occasion for the Nigerians. Nigeria, Africa's most populated nation (2) They are really daft about their football. And on the way to the stadium (.) this morning all I could see were Nigerians off the train (.) heading to the stadium in their numbers (.) and obviously awash with green flags.

While the Spanish fan is individualized, the Nigerians are described as a mass. We are – like a Spanish player at one point – 'surrounded by green-shirted' people who are rarely individualized.

Is this racist? On one level, the emphasis on Spanish play and success at the start of the game is simply the commentator doing his job of building tension and watching it play out. And it is true that once the Nigerians began getting more possession and passing better further into the game, the patterns changed slightly, with more talk about Nigerian skill and fewer negative comments. Some of the talk is about expectations of the match, which evolve with the action. At one point the commentator states, after some nifty dribbling of the ball, 'They're so skilful, the Nigerians.' This may indeed simply be praise for skilful play. However, the skill of the Spanish is represented more as something listeners to the commentary already know, embedded inside other statements or left unstated, or is a matter of the skill of individual players. The overt statement of a collective Nigerian skilfulness suggests that this is news, that it goes against what 'everyone' knows. In the context of a World Cup game, and where the Nigerians are the current Olympic football champions, a phrase such as 'Beautiful play' would have sufficed.

The negative comments about the Nigerians are classic cases of the prejudicial commentary noted by Rainville and McCormick on NFL matches. Black and white players – in this case, black and white teams – are spoken about

within expectations of greater white skill and determination to win, expectations which are rarely allowed to be challenged.

There are textual clues, then, that the text is built upon scripts and background knowledge, mobilized in the overall topics and in the evaluations which explore those topics, that Europeans are skilful and that an African team is unlikely to do well. There is, as with Motson, no deliberate or overt prejudice at work. But the semantic structures that are present make most sense within inferential structures and scripts which emphasize white actors as the ones to be interested in and emphasize their positive attributes.

There is, moreover, not much done to add to or revise prior knowledge about Africans. Much more knowledge is given about the Spanish players and team, giving them greater specificity. When a Spanish footballer plays well, he is praised. When, as in the example above, a Nigerian footballer does well, the whole team is praised as skilful. Moreover, references to Nigerian players are often in terms of a European knowledge. The Nigerian team 'includes several players with European experience'. When Nigeria scores, the commentator says, 'Spain's lead is wiped out within four minutes and there is terrific celebrations going on there inside this stadium because Mutio Adepoju who plays his club football in Spain has headed Nigeria level.' The game is known in European terms.

Such sports commentary is not just telling us about an attitude to Nigerian football. The inferential structures we can detect here are much more general. Sport is, as discussed above, often a **metonym** for the nation, a site at which national characteristics and expectations are established and renewed. In a sporting context, national and ethnic identity and pride are very much at stake. Moreover, much of what we know about other countries is formed in asides and inferences in contexts such as sport, fiction and celebrity gossip. As Philo (2001) notes, some countries only ever get into British news if a hot air balloon with the celebrity businessman Richard Branson in it floats over their territory. Therefore the social cognition in World Cup commentary intersects with much wider ideological forces.

This chapter has analysed racism within the argument that while explicit racism is rare, it is present as a set of inferential structures to make sense of cultural practices. Van Dijk's analysis of the themes or macropropositions of a text allow us to make a text accountable for the semantic resources which it draws on. It also provides a way of theorizing how a text draws on socially shared background knowledge. That analysis was applied to broadcast sports commentary to argue that, although 'race' is rarely explicitly mentioned there, it forms a key part of the shared cognition of broadcaster and audiences about what is going on in sports events.

### Further reading

A concise account by van Dijk of his analysis of semantic macrostructures is his chapter in *Discourse and Communication* (1985). He has applied his analysis in fuller detail to news discourse in *News as Discourse* (1988a) and has written many books and articles on racism (e.g. van Dijk 1993), including an account of people's discursive strategies to deny racism (van Dijk 1999). A similar social cognitive approach is taken by Wodak in studying nationalism and prejudice in Austria (e.g. Wodak 1996). Wetherell and Potter (1992) represent an alternative major approach to racist discourse.