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## **LINGUISTIC PATTERNS OF RACISM IN GERMAN FOOTBALL**

This research analyzes the media discourse on racism in football in Germany. The main goal of this paper is to find linguistic patterns that should reflect the way in which racist behavior is related to the immigrant background of certain football players. For this purpose, several media texts were selected that describe cases in which some German football players were exposed to racism, such as Jérôme Boateng, Mesut Özil and Gerald Asamoah. These three show different contexts that encouraged racist behavior towards them, but all three cases could be summed up by Mesut Özil's sentence: "German when we win, immigrant when we lose". The methodology applied in this work is based on the linguistic analysis of the discourse. This approach has especially developed among German linguists who believe that discourse analysis should be conducted exclusively on the basis of the language itself and linguistic patterns, and that conclusions are drawn only on the basis of what is linguistically realized.

**Key words:** linguistic patterns; racist behavior; football; immigrant background; media discourse; identity

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper relies on the theoretical background of linguistic discourse analysis and the linguistic patterns of public communication. In linguistics, ‘discourse’ is a “collection of clearly interrelated texts, signs of different types, actions, bodies of knowledge, concepts, perspectives, positions, questions, and opinions within a specific thematic and temporal context, which can affect various societal areas. According to a shorter definition, ‘discourse’ is to be understood as a communicative social event.”<sup>1</sup> (Lisičić-Hedžić 2021: 58) The concept of ‘discourse’ in its current sense was shaped by the French psychologist and philosopher Michel Foucault, and this understanding of discourse forms the starting point for linguistic discourse analysis. According to Foucault (1981: 74), discourses are more than totalities of signs; they are practices that “systematically form the objects of which they speak”. Discourse is not a speech act but a chain of statements or a formation, as described in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1981): “a set of statements that belong to the same system of formation”<sup>2</sup> (Foucault 1981: 156). According to Niehr (2013: 79), “linguistic discourse analyses should provide information on the extent to which collective thought patterns and mentalities are reflected in language use.” Linguistic discourse analysis represents an extension of text linguistics as it goes beyond text boundaries and “always considers an ‘ensemble of texts’ (a so-called text corpus)”<sup>3</sup> (Niehr 2014: 29). In fact, linguistic discourse analysis is rooted in the belief “that singular texts are always part of a larger linguistic-communicative context and that one way of grasping this context is to understand it as ‘discourse’”<sup>4</sup> (Meer and Pick 2019: 141).

Linguistic discourse analysis as a reflection of power and domination through language, especially in the last 30 years, is thus closest to the linguistics of public communication. In turn, public communication is linked to language politics, which includes social control, censorship, and normed societal situations. Another characteristic of public communication is the ideological intent behind it, expressed through the description of problematic social conditions or entire communication processes. Therefore, “the concept of ideology is still viewed as a specific form of knowledge close to power and domination”<sup>5</sup>. (Krieger and Sevignani 2019: 4) In other words,

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- 1 Free translation from German by the author A. Ć.
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apart from the obvious ways of displaying power, such as through laws, another way that the dominant groups show their power and dominance is through the control of public discourse and communication (van Dijk 2006). Control over the context represents control over the time and/or place of the communication event and the way that the members are represented. Accordingly, these characteristics of public communication are reflected through various language patterns, such as the speaker's particular choice of form of speech and its meaning, the way in which the speaker is organized verbally to resolve a speech situation, as well as the use of verbal and non-verbal signs to achieve the purpose of communication. Consequently, language patterns are important in public communication in modern society, and "such linguistic phenomena in communication are increasingly the subject of contemporary semantic, pragmalinguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse research"<sup>6</sup> (Ćurković 2022: 329). Furthermore, in one of the latest studies on discourse, the authors Warnke, Mattfeld and Trochemowitz argue that the interest in discourse linguistics is rooted in contradiction in the discourse itself insofar as we assume that the relationship between discourse and language is inconceivable without conflicts, tensions, and incompatibilities. In view of this, discourse linguistics has the potential to build bridges between specific linguistic interests and topics related to contradictions and, furthermore, to make linguistic research on contradictions in the fields of discourse research and Contradiction Studies interdisciplinary (2024). According to this view, discourse is directly connected to contradictions, "for it is discourse that ensures that contradictions are linguistically produced and that tensions between facts are identified and addressed as such. Without the need to negotiate, develop, change, or criticize something in contradiction, there would be no reason for discourse."<sup>7</sup> (ibid. 9)

As media has been said to have the power to perpetuate stereotypes and racist beliefs, especially towards groups classified as *others* and differing from the norm, such as the case with refugees and immigrants (van Dijk 2000), the goal of this research paper is to investigate through linguistic discourse analysis<sup>8</sup> how these claims corre-

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8 Here we want to emphasize that our analysis does not focus on critical discourse analysis but on linguistic discourse analysis. This approach has particularly developed among German linguists, who find that discourse analysis should be conducted exclusively based on the language itself and linguistic patterns and thus conclusions are drawn exclusively based on what is linguistically realized. In this sense, we provide the explanation given by Smailagić (2016: 55): "[The] concept of discourse follows Foucault's notion of discourse as a social (and cultural) practice, and accordingly, the concept of critical discourse analysis (CDA), a method through which certain insights into and about society are gained through the analysis of discourse, such as newspaper articles [...] From this approach, especially among linguists in Germany, the concept of linguistic discourse

late with the reports on racism in football connected to the immigrant background of individual football players.

## 2. TOPIC AND CONTEXT OF PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

In terms of topics, van Dijk (2013) talks about discourse analysis at the global and local level and emphasizes how in the ideological discourse “we may expect largely negative topics about *Them*, and neutral or positive topics about *Us*” (van Dijk 2013: 182-183) using precisely the case of the mass media reporting on immigration as an example where there is a negative representation of *Them* through immigrants being seen as threats, problems, and criminals, to name a few. In the context of football racism is a well-documented issue that affects players worldwide. In Germany, the problem is exacerbated by the complex relationship between national identity and immigration. This study seeks to explore how media discourse reflects and possibly perpetuates racism by examining linguistic patterns in media coverage of football players with immigrant backgrounds. The primary objective of this research is to identify and analyze linguistic patterns in media texts that connect racist behaviour to the immigrant background of German football players. Germany’s history with immigration and national identity is complex. The country has a significant population of people with immigrant backgrounds, many of whom face discrimination in various aspects of life, including sports. Football, a highly popular sport, is a microcosm of these broader societal issues.

By focusing on the cases of Jerome Boateng, Mesut Özil and Gerald Asamoah, this study aims to uncover how media language contributes to the perception of these players as outsiders when they underperform and as representatives of the nation when they succeed. Such discourse creates conflicts, tensions and contradictions, as it has been suggested in the previous chapter above. The role of the media in shaping public perceptions of race and ethnicity is well established. Media discourse can either challenge or reinforce racial stereotypes. In the context of football, media coverage often reflects broader societal attitudes towards race and immigration.

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analysis (LDA) has developed, aiming to analyze discourse through precise and clear analysis of the language itself used in that discourse. This has proven to be extremely necessary over time since many discourse analyses conducted by sociologists, historians, lawyers, or literary theorists have drawn conclusions about this linguistic product without analyzing the language itself and without applying any linguistic method.” (Free translation from Bosnian by the author A. Ć.)

### 3. REVIEW OF EARLIER RESEARCH STUDIES

Racism in football has been the subject of numerous studies, which have highlighted how racial and ethnic discrimination manifests in various forms, from verbal abuse by fans to biased media coverage. Scholars have noted that football players with immigrant backgrounds often face additional scrutiny and are more likely to be targeted by racist behaviour. In their study of whether there is a racial bias in ratings of professional football players in Italian newspapers, the authors Principe and van Ours find that there is such a bias. They argue that newspaper football experts do seem to have a racial bias in their rating of players that might be unconscious discrimination related to stereotyping of black players (2022: 1). At the same time the study recognizes that unintentional discrimination is as harmful to the discriminated as intentional discrimination is and it gives a recommendation that creating awareness by exposure might be able to wipe out racial bias in newspaper ratings and perhaps also in the behaviour of others involved in football or sports in general. “To the extent that there are spillover effects from newspaper reports to opinions in society, making clear that there is a racial bias will help reduce discrimination across the board” (ibid. 9). Bradbury et al conducted extensive research on representation and structural discrimination in football in Europe in which they identified the continuation of overt racism and minority abuse directed at players by spectators, coaches and other players in the men’s amateur and professional games across Europe. This has included: anti-black, anti-Semitic, anti-gypsy, islamophobic, ethno-nationalist and sectarian sentiment. In its recommendations this research appeals to UEFA<sup>9</sup>, national federations, professional football clubs and other related football bodies to “work collaboratively to develop and deliver an industry-standard cultural and gender diversity training programme across the football industry” that should be designed “to address several key areas, including; legislative issues around equality, challenging physical and cultural stereotypes, understanding institutional discrimination and the promoting the value and benefits of diversity to all football organisations” (ibid. 78). In the report of the Council of Europe on the media perspective regarding sport and discrimination it has been recognized that “the huge media coverage of football has made the racist events all the more visible. The website of the network Football Against Racism in Europe (FARE) reports incidents virtually daily and from all over Europe” (2008: 9). “The way in which black footballers are welcomed in some European stadiums (fans throw bananas at them while uttering guttural sounds, a way of comparing them to

9 UEFA = Union of European Football Associations

apes and setting them apart from human beings) is a reminder that the era of the ‘human zoo’ is not so distant” wrote the researcher and historian Pap Ndiaye in his latest book *La condition noire. Essai sur une minorité française*<sup>10</sup> (ibid. 11). The report also emphasizes that “rejection of difference, fear of others, self-isolation ... racist acts showed the contradictions inherent in sport, whose values were those of a universal language promoting respect and openness to others.” (ibid. 11) In his study on social media racist discourse in English football Cleland finds that “social media sites such as fan message boards have allowed racist thoughts to flourish online, in particular by rejecting multiculturalism and Islam through the presentation of whiteness and national belonging and an outright hostility and resistance toward the Other” (2013: 415). Of particular relevance to online discussions surrounding racism, Van Dijk has defined racist discourse as “a form of discriminatory social practice that manifests itself in text, talk and communication. Together with other (non-verbal) discriminatory practices, racist discourse contributes to the reproduction of racism as a form of ethnic or “racial” domination” (2004: 351).

#### 4. METHODOLOGY AND CORPUS

This study employs a qualitative content analysis of selected media texts. The texts in the corpus were selected based on an online search of certain specified words, such as racism in football, Özil, Asamoah, Boateng and racism. The texts that were first offered through such an online search were included in the corpus. The analysis focuses on identifying recurring linguistic patterns and themes that reflect racist attitudes towards football players with immigrant backgrounds, which could be grouped into categories of patterns surrounding emphasis on heritage, questioning of loyalty and duality of identity. The texts are sourced from various media outlets, including newspapers, online news portals and sports magazines in German and English press. Specifically, the analysis includes articles published in the regional newspapers *Augsburger Allgemeine*, *Die Tageszeitung* and *Die Abendzeitung München* on Jérôme Boateng; articles from the nationwide Deutsche Welle, German nationwide portals deutschlandfunk.de, tagesschau.de and English sport portal goal.com; articles from the Swiss portal watson.ch and German nation wide portal deutschlandfunk.de on Gerald Asamoah.

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10 Pap Ndiaye, “La condition noire. Essai sur une minorité française”, Editions Calmann-Lévy, 2008.

## 5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

**Jérôme Boateng**, born to a Ghanaian father and a German mother, has faced racism throughout his career. Despite his success as one of the world's best midfield defenders and huge engagement in social work, including winning the World Cup with Germany, he has often been targeted by racist remarks from fans and the media. The following examples shows a racist insult given by an AfD<sup>11</sup> German politician, Alexander Gauland, referring to his heritage:

“...the midfield defender might play quite well, but: “People don’t want a Boateng as a neighbor.” Chancellor Angela Merkel communicated through her spokesperson, “This statement that was made is a despicable and sad statement.”” (Article 1.1.)<sup>12</sup>

“In 2016, the AfD politician Alexander Gauland made a racist insult towards Boateng. Although the son of a Ghanaian and a German is appreciated as a national player, he is considered a foreigner: “People like him as a football player. But they don’t want a Boateng as a neighbor.” Following this, there was significant solidarity with Boateng, including an action where a real estate company offered its apartments in a building where he had previously lived at a particularly high price, advertising that one could become Boateng’s neighbor here.” (Article 1.2.)<sup>13</sup>

This statement received widespread media coverage, with many articles focusing on Boateng’s immigrant background rather than his achievements as a footballer. The use of the term “neighbour” in this context implies a sense of otherness and exclusion from the national community. Both examples, however, show that the media simultaneously reported the condemnation of the racist insult against Boateng, starting from the political leadership of Chancellor Merkel to the business community in the area where Boateng lived. At the same time, it is worth mentioning, that Boateng was recognized as the “Charity King” in German society and even received a prestigious Bambi award for his efforts towards the integration of immigrant children into German society:

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11 AfD = Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany) – political party

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“Boateng, known as the Charity King, founded the organization “Mitternachtssport” in Berlin in 2010 with his friend Ismail Öner. In 2013, he was knighted with the Bambi Award for Integration. “He is far too modest about being the founder of one of the most successful and renowned youth projects in Germany,” Öner told AZ. “He is a blessing from God for us.” “Better a duel on the field than on the street,” said Boateng. [...] Öner even claims: “He is the first football-playing social worker in Bayern’s history.”” (Article 1.3.)<sup>14</sup>

**Mesut Özil**, born to Turkish parents in Germany, has had a distinguished career but has also been the target of racist abuse. His decision to retire from international football in 2018, citing racism and disrespect, brought significant attention to the issue. Media coverage of Özil often fluctuates based on his performance. When successful, he is celebrated as a symbol of multicultural Germany; when he underperforms, he is depicted as an outsider. This duality is captured in Özil’s statement, “German when we win, an immigrant when we lose.”

“There was also a disturbing racial undertone to the criticism coming from some quarters, at a time when German’s diplomatic relationship with Turkey – the country of Ozil’s parents hailed from – was on the verge of complete collapse. Indeed, when Ozil quit the national team after the national team’s shock first-round elimination in Russia, he lashed out at the country’s football federation (DFB) and how they viewed him: “I am German when we win, but I am an immigrant when we lose.” Much of the controversy had centred on Ozil’s ties to Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, with whom he had posed for a photo alongside Ilkay Gundogan.” (Article 2.1.)

“For Grindel, [DFB President] it’s a no-go. “We at the DFB respect the sometimes challenging personal situations of our players with a migration background, but football must be lived by values, and in areas where Mr. Erdogan holds responsibility, these values are not sufficiently upheld. Therefore, one must not allow themselves to be exploited for campaign purposes.”” <sup>15</sup>(Article 2.2.)

“Özil breaks his silence. He defends his photos with Erdogan, sharply attacks the DFB and its chief Grindel, and also makes serious accusations against German media and a DFB sponsor. “With a heavy heart and after much consideration, I will no longer play for Germany on an international level as long as I feel this sense of racism and disrespect,” he shares in English via Twitter.” (Article 2.3.)

“Germany crushed out in the group stage of the 2018 World Cup in Russia – the national team’s worst performance in decades. The President of the DFB, Reinhard Grindel, attempted to deflect

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criticism from himself by blaming Özil's Erdogan meeting for distracting the team. Grindel's reaction drew intense criticism from German politicians and soccer fans. [...] In an eviscerating statement on Twitter, Özil resigned from international play in July 2018, aged 29. "I will no longer stand for being a scapegoat for his incompetence", the footballer said of Grindel. Accusing the DFB president of racism, he thanked Löw and others in the German team for their support. In total, he played 92 matches for Germany, scored 23 goals and registered 40 assists. [...] "In the eyes of Grindel and his supporters, I am German when we win, but I am an immigrant when we lose," he added. "I feel unwanted and think that what I have achieved since my international debut in 2009 has been forgotten. "Despite paying taxes in Germany, donating facilities to German schools and winning the World Cup with Germany in 2014, I am still not accepted into society. I am treated as being 'different'." [...] "What I can't accept," Özil wrote, "are German media outlets repeatedly blaming my dual-heritage and a simple picture for a bad World Cup on behalf of an entire squad. "They didn't criticize my performances, they didn't criticize the team's performances, they just criticized my Turkish ancestry and respect for my upbringing. This crosses a personal line that should never be crossed, as newspapers try to turn the nation of Germany against me." (Article 2.4.)

Following Germany's early exit from the 2018 World Cup, Özil faced harsh criticism, with many articles emphasizing his Turkish heritage. Terms like "Turkish-German" and "dual national" were frequently used, highlighting his immigrant background as a factor in the team's failure. According to the survey of the study at Bielefeld University on violence, discrimination, racism, hostility towards people and prejudices, led by social psychologist Andreas Zick, "Özil became one of the favourite players in the survey, a figure many identified with. This has led to a reduction in racist attitudes among the participants. We called this the 'Özil Effect' Suddenly, he became an inclusive figure."<sup>16</sup> To Özil's statement "German when we win, immigrants when we lose", Zick says that it summarizes some of the outcomes of his research: "People with a migration background need to speak German better than people without roots abroad to be successful. This is a typical experience: They always have to make a little more effort." (ibid.) Whether Özil's accusations of racism are justified, Zick gives examples of "an SPD politician who called him a 'goat-fucker'. That is the prototype of a racist prejudice. An insulting and dehumanizing characteristic is attributed to him, which establishes a difference between 'us' and 'them.' However,

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16 Jean-Pierre Ziegler: „Debatte nach Özils Rücktritt „Man kann mit Rassismus so gut Politik machen wie lange nicht“, <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/gesellschaft/mesut-oezil-ein-wissenschaftler-erklaert-den-oezil-efekt-a-1219999.html> . Free translation from German by the author A. Ć.

whether the criticism from DFB President Grindel is racist, one must doubt. Özil should reconsider whom he accuses of racism. It must not become a phrase that he throws at anyone who criticizes Özil.” (ibid.)

**Gerald Asamoah**, originally from Ghana, was the first African-born player to represent Germany. Throughout his career, he experienced racist abuse from fans and the media. Media reports on Asamoah often highlight his African origin, sometimes overshadowing his contributions to the team. Phrases like “African German” are common, which emphasize his otherness. In one instance, after a poor performance, an article described Asamoah as “lacking the German fighting spirit,” implicitly linking his perceived inadequacies to his African heritage. This type of language reinforces stereotypes and perpetuates the idea that he is not fully part of the German national identity. Nevertheless, Asamoah has been actively combating racism for years.

“I realized early on that more is expected of me than of other people.” [...] He became vice-world champion with Germany – and was pelted with bananas in Cottbus. He played over 270 times for FC Schalke 04 – and yet was slandered by an opponent as a “black pig.” Gerald Asamoah has experienced that every black person in Germany can become a victim of racist violence - even if he is the idol of hundreds of thousands of fans as a professional footballer.

[Journalist:] In an interview with “Die Zeit,” you reported that you were previously called “Silverback” by teammates due to your muscular physique, reminiscent of a gorilla, but you did not perceive this as racism. Your interview partner, Germany’s first black national player Erwin Kostedde, saw it differently. Did you reconsider the role of language after the conversation?

[Asamoah:] The conversation with Kostedde made me think. In the past, I simply accepted such remarks and only much later began to question them. Today, I can say that someone who calls me a “Silverback” is crossing a boundary, and I would make that clear to them. [...] I hope that many people understand that racism in Germany is a long-standing and still existing reality. (Article 3.1.) 17

Gerald Asamoah on racism: “It’s a pain you can’t ignore. It’s very tough for me to even talk about such a topic in the year 2020,” said former German national player Gerald Asamoah on Df. The club ambassador for Schalke 04 still experiences racism today - even at Schalke. (Article 3.2.)18

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## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The analysis of media texts reveals several recurring linguistic patterns that reflect racist attitudes towards football players with immigrant backgrounds:

1. **Emphasis on Heritage:** Media coverage often highlights the players' immigrant backgrounds, especially following poor performances. Terms like "Turkish-German" or "African-German" are used to underscore their perceived otherness.

2. **Questioning Loyalty:** The loyalty of players with immigrant backgrounds is frequently questioned. Phrases such as "not truly German" suggest that their commitment to the national team is conditional.

3. **Duality of Identity:** The fluctuation in how players are described based on their performance illustrates a duality in their perceived identity. Successful performances lead to their celebration as symbols of a multicultural Germany, while failures result in their depiction as outsiders.

These linguistic patterns reflect and reinforce societal attitudes towards race and immigration. The consistent emphasis on the players' immigrant backgrounds can contribute to a sense of exclusion and alienation, impacting their mental well-being and performance.

The findings of this study have broader implications for understanding how media discourse shapes public perceptions of race and identity. The treatment of football players with immigrant backgrounds serves as a microcosm of the challenges faced by immigrants in Germany. It highlights the need for more inclusive and equitable media practices.

This research has identified and analyzed linguistic patterns in media coverage that reflect and perpetuate racism towards football players with immigrant backgrounds in Germany. By focusing on the cases of Jérôme Boateng, Mesut Özil and Gerald Asamoah, the study has highlighted how media language contributes to the perception of these players as outsiders when they underperform and as representatives of the nation when they succeed. The findings underscore the need for more inclusive media practices that recognize and celebrate the diverse identities of all players.

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## LINGVISTIČKI OBRASCI RASIZMA U NJEMAČKOM NOGOMETU

### Sažetak:

Ovo istraživanje analizira medijski diskurs o rasizmu u nogometu u Njemačkoj. Glavni cilj ovog rada je pronaći lingvističke obrasce koji bi trebali odražavati način na koji je rasističko ponašanje povezano s imigrantskim porijeklom pojedinih nogometaša. U tu svrhu odabrano je nekoliko medijskih tekstova koji opisuju slučajeve u kojima su neki njemački nogometaši bili izloženi rasizmu, poput Jérômea Boatenga, Mesuta Özila i Geralda Asamoaha. Ova trojica pokazuju različite kontekste koji su potaknuli rasističko ponašanje prema njima, ali bi se sva tri slučaja mogla sažeti rečenicom Mesuta Özila: „Nijemac kad pobjeđujemo, imigrant kad gubimo“. Metodologija primijenjena u ovom radu temelji se na lingvističkoj analizi diskursa. Ovaj pristup se posebno razvio među njemačkim lingvistima koji smatraju da se analiza diskursa treba provoditi isključivo na bazi samog jezika i jezičnih obrazaca te se zaključci izvode samo na osnovu onoga što je jezično ostvareno.

**Ključne riječi:** lingvistički obrasci; rasističko ponašanje; nogomet; imigrantsko porijeklo; medijski diskurs; identitet

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