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From football cliché to syntactic change: remarks on the phraseology of football

Jim Walker

Abstract:

This article has three separate and apparently unconnected focuses:
1. To raise the profile of the language of sport, and more particularly that of football, as a site for further investigation in lexical and supralexical research,
2. To attempt a (re)definition of the terms *cliché*, a particular kind of fixed expression which is arguably under-researched in the literature on phraseology and which throws light on the relationship between phraseologisms and register.
3. To investigate the possibility that a particular recurrent syntactic frame associated for many speakers with football is spreading further afield and acting as the source of a major change in the tense-aspect system of British English.
These three points, despite appearances, are in fact closely linked, in that the football register is a rich source of cliché, as the term will be defined here, and that it is *a priori* not absurd to hypothesize that, given the huge coverage afforded to football through the media, a syntactic cliché may not be having a huge effect on the language as a whole

While it would of course be an exaggeration to claim that the language of sport has not been the subject of serious study[1], it would be equally inaccurate to wish to pretend that it has been given the place it deserves. Despite its immense popularity and global reach, football is particularly hard done by. As an illustration of this trend, which in this introduction seeks only to be anecdotal, but which will be reinforced throughout the article, we might note that in the Oxford English Dictionary, while space is devoted to the *Fosbury flop*, a high-jumping technique first performed in 1968, there is no room for the Cruyff turn, a piece of football trickery that broke onto the world stage in 1974 and has been performed by countless schoolchildren ever since. The *nutmeg* only entered the OED in 2010, and a *flick-on* has yet to make it, waiting on the sidelines in the company of *hospital ball* and *rush goalie*.[2] Similarly, the huge dictionary of catchphrases compiled by Eric Partridge (1992) is surely the weaker for

failing to register what is almost certainly the most famous and most frequently repeated sentence in the history of British football, uttered by BBC commentator Kenneth Wolstenholme in the dying seconds of the 1966 World Cup Final: "They think it's all over. It is now."[3]

Many of the works extant in the literature are essentially lexicographical, consisting of glossaries often compiled by fans rather than academics, though as I hope this essay will demonstrate, there is nothing antinomical about these two words[4]. I would like to redress the balance somewhat here and suggest that the language of sport, and of football in particular, is a particularly rich picking ground for scholars in the lexicology, phraseology and, as the main thrust of this article will attempt to show, the lexico-syntactic interface from a diachronic perspective.

I shall begin by illustrating what I call the football register, which will initially require me to state quite clearly, or as clearly as is possible given the heterogeneous nature of the definitions on offer, exactly what I mean by the term register. I will then attempt to make a distinction between the notion of register and that of cliché, since the proposal that I sketch out here is that a particular cliché prevalent in footballing discourse has begun to have an effect on language beyond the footballing register. This will require me first of all to defend the notion of a grammatical cliché and second to entertain what might seem initially to be a rather improbable hypothesis.

1. Defining register

Register is a notoriously difficult concept to handle and we might be forgiven if we ultimately feel that register is defined as the things studied by people who study register. The difficulties become compounding if we throw terms like style and genre into the mix. While this is not the place to attempt a summary of the myriad ways in which the term *register* has been used in the past[5], it is nevertheless important to address the issue albeit briefly, to make clear the way in which the terms will be understood here, the better to distinguish it from the somewhat idiosyncratic use of the term *cliché* to be introduced below.

I shall be adopting an essentially Trudgillian or Wardhaughian approach to register. Both define register with respect to the language of particular social groups involved in particular occupations, this latter word being taken in as broad a sense as possible. As Trudgill has it: "We use register in the sense of a variety of language determined by topic, subject matter or

activity, such as the register of mathematics, the register of medicine, or the register of pigeon fancying" (Trudgill, 1991: 121). Using a different set of occupations, the motivation for which can only be the subject of speculation, Wardhaugh has: "Registers are sets of language items associated with discreet occupational social groups. Surgeons, airline pilots, bank managers, sales clerks, jazz bands, and pimps employ different registers" (Wardhaugh, 2009: 48). However, in a manner somewhat akin to Ferguson (1983), I shall seek to carve out more space than either Trudgill or Wardhaugh who, like many others, regard register as "almost exclusively a matter of lexis" (Trudgill 1999: 121), by showing the importance of syntactic aspects of register.[6] Crucially the notion of register as interacting with the formality continuum, something that we find for example, to take only recent examples, in Biber & Conrad 2009 and Hughes 2008, will not be adopted here[7]. When referring to different levels of formality, we will follow the tradition of using the term *style*.

2. Redefining cliché? I'm as sick as a parrot, Brian

Many of the examples set out below are uncontroversially instances of footballing register. However, a number of expressions have crossed the border between the safe territory of register to into the murky world of cliché. Turning to dictionary definitions of the word cliché, we find such examples as:

> Oxford English Dictionary: A stereotyped expression, a commonplace phrase; also, a stereotyped character, style, etc.

Cliché is very often associated with the idea of overuse and refers to a word or expression that ceases to have any real meaning, so commonplace has it become. A number of the examples in the OED illustrate this, such as:

> O. Jennings *Morphia Habit* vi. 72 The above description of morphinism has been repeated by one compiler after another, until it has become a *cliché*.

Indeed, it would appear that "cliché" collocates approximately only slightly less frequently with the copula "become" than with "be".[8] All well and good. I should however like to add a further consideration to the definition of cliché, because I do not find the above to be satisfactory, and

such definitions do not quite get to the heart of where register stops and cliché begins, or perhaps more precisely the exact relationship of hypernymy that I take to exist between the two terms.[9] It is particularly important to do so, in light of the fact that cliché is under-researched, or under-theorized, in the extant literature on phraseology. For instance, it does not appear in the extremely useful terminological survey provided by Granger and Paquot (2008), and in fact does not appear a single time in the entire volume from which the aforementioned article appears (Granger and Meunier, 2008). It seems to me, however, that there is a case for distinguishing cliché as a particular form of phraseologism, perhaps a subset of the routine formulae as defined by Cowie (1998). Cliché, as I define it here, refers to stock expressions that certainly function as a single unit, and which are associated with a particular domain of activity, and may therefore be thought to be part of the register, though crucially they do not necessarily display a particularly high frequency of usage by people actually involved in the given register. What is more importantly characteristic of the cliché is that: 1) it is used self-consciously. In other words, it is a cliché used *qua* cliché; 2) it is available for speakers to use beyond the bounds of the register itself, as delimited above. In other words, it slips its moorings and is free to float in open ocean of the language, where it can undergo modifications it might otherwise not have been subject to, had it remained within the register proper. A few examples should serve to illustrate this:

> I've been a sports writer – I know all about clichés, thank you. It's a game of two halves, Brian, but at the end of the day the lads gave 110 per cent but I'm sick as a parrot that we didn't sneak it early doors.[10]

This statement, written on a blog written by Sharon Wheeler, a Lecturer in Journalism and a former sports journalist is a fine example of a number of clichés being self-consciously used *qua* cliché, the writer stringing together a series of them for comedic effect. This is not to deny that they form part of the footballing register: "early doors" certainly does, as we shall see below, but "sick as a parrot", while being the phrase almost anybody solicited would be likely to associate with footballers, is in fact very much rarer. As an illustration, a cursory search on the website of the British Guardian newspaper gave a total of 387 hits for "early doors", 188 of which came from football-related reports (43%) and a further 91 from other sports (72% en tout), as opposed to only 80 hits for "sick as a parrot", of which 24 were football related (30%), 5 were in direct opposition to

"over the moon", another oft-cited footballer's cliché, and all of which were used in some sense consciously *qua* cliché, as in the following examples:

> A football club left sick as a parrot at the theft of their goalposts is over the moon at getting use of a new pitch. South Wales Evening Post, 9/9/2010

> Robbie Williams is over the moon about getting back with Take That – but sick as a parrot that he's had to hang up his footie boots. Daily Mirror, 2/8/2010

> These horrible, horrible times are forcing a huge change in the way in which we all look at investment. I reckon the Great Moderation of the recent decades is over and the cult of equities is as sick as the proverbial parrot. Financial Times, 6/12/2010

Because a cliché is a self-conscious manifestation of (what is perhaps erroneously believed to be) register, it is often used without any reference to its origin, because this is taken to be common knowledge, in contexts that have nothing to do with football, and indeed even by people who may know very little about the game itself. A striking example of this is the song by British band Chumbawumba, entitled *Brian:*

> It's all about getting the ball in the back of the net, Brian
> I'm as sick as a parrot, Brian
> I'm over the moon, Brian
> Well, I think the lads were well worth a point, Brian
> It was a game of two halves, Brian[11]

The use of "Brian" as a name for the archetypal football journalist-interviewer has become a stock-in-trade of football cliché. Although I have been unable to pinpoint the exact origin of the phrase, it is most likely to derive from British football commentator and presenter Brian Moore, who for many years fronted ITV's football coverage in the company of manager and pundit Brian Clough, forming something of a double act referred to by many as The Two Brians.

A final illustration of the difference between cliché and register is that the former, precisely because of the two preceding reasons, is more liable to definitively leave the world of football itself to become transposed and modified, but we can nevertheless be certain we are dealing with a football

cliché. For example, the following is the title of a review of a rock concert in the British daily, The Independent:

> A show of two halves, Rod[12]

The footballing cliché "it's a game of two halves", meaning roughly that it is perfectly possible for a team to overturn a poor first half performance by a better display (itself something of a cliché) in the second half, and that we should not therefore rush to judgement after only forty-five minutes, has been modified to illustrate the reviewer's contention that the concert in question was of uneven quality. The name Brian, discussed above, has been replaced by Rod, as the singer in question was Rod Stewart, a well known fan of Celtic.

3. The linguistic importance of the football register: lexico-phraseology

Having attempted to set out my stall for the cliché, I return to footballing register proper. My aim in this section is to:

1. establish the existence of a register of football as distinct from that of sporting register in general;
2. work up from the lexical to the syntactic level, to show that footballing register works on all linguistic levels, even the phonological,, which will move the discussion on to;

3 grammatical examples that are clichés and which may have spurred some form of syntactic change beyond the bounds of footballing register[13].

3.1. Phonological characteristics?

The structure of this section, which builds from the smallest units up towards the syntactic, is conventional and homely, but presents the disadvantage of placing the most tentative section first. Is it possible to claim any kind of phonological characteristic of footballing register? After all, it is vanishingly rare to see phonology discussed in the literature on register. I would like to claim, however, that in the footballing register, there is at least one example of a word that undergoes phonological modification by virtue of its use in the register, and which is thus made to differ from its use in other contexts. It is the example of the pronunciation

of the disyllabic word *England* as a trisyllabic *Ingerland*, this latter representation being the most common orthographic representation, *Ingerlund* being another. This attempts to mirror the way the word is chanted by fans, and is clearly part of the footballing register, as evidenced by the series of books on the sociology of football by Mark Perryman (2002, 2010). Indeed it is defined as such by the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary:

> Ingerland: [ˈɪŋgɜːlænd] a way of writing and saying England used by football fans as a name for the English national football (soccer) team

It would seem that further research into phonology as a component of register, in sport and in other fields, might prove fruitful.

3.2. Lexical characteristics of footballing register

One characteristic of footballing register is the use of specialist and/or archaic terms in a specialized sense. I shall illustrate this with four examples: SHIP; EARLY DOORS; DIMINUTIVE; STONEWALL

SHIP v.tr.

> OED Of a vessel: To take in (water) over the side; to be submerged or flooded with (water) by waves breaking over it; esp. ***to ship a sea***. Said also of the occupants of the vessel.

This rather technical term is little used, it would appear. A cursory search on the Factiva database for the last three months of 2010 turned up no *ship a sea* and only 4 examples of *ship water*[14]. However, there were 516 examples of the verb *ship* collocating with the noun *goal*, such as the following instance.

> Rugby recovered well after shipping two goals in the first ten minutes but were undone in the final stages. Coventry Evening Telegraph, 20/12/2010

This particular term would appear to be entirely football related, as there were no instances of *ship tries* or *ship wickets*, to take two other very popular sports as examples. This transfer is not recorded by the OED.

EARLY DOORS adv. (adj.?)

Early doors is a term that originates from the register of theatre, as evidenced by the OED definition:

> In a theatre, etc.: a period of admission ending some time before the performance begins, during which a wider selection of seating is available, usually for a higher price. Now *hist.*

The usage has now been transferred to the world of football, in the sense of “the first few minutes of a match”, as in the following example:

> It was Barnsley’s second home defeat and boss Mark Robins said: “We were caught early doors and ended up like rabbits in headlights.” Daily Star, 8/11/2010

The usage is attributed, almost certainly apocryphally, to former British football manager Ron Atkinson, an erstwhile regular of the television studios whose somewhat idiosyncratic language has been a source of amusement for some time, even to the extent of being labelled Ronglish:

> His own lexicon of football terms, dubbed “Ronglish”, include such words as “lollipops” (step-overs), “early doors” (the opening minutes of a game) and “giving it the eyebrows” (a flicked header). This air of good-natured showmanship, accentuated by his sunglasses, snappy suits, smart cars and unabashed worship of Frank Sinatra, made him something of a national treasure. Sunday Times, 25/04/2004[15].

The use of *early doors* in its original theatre sense is now extremely rare, but the expression’s use as an adverb, essentially as a synonym of “early” are now to be found in many non-footballing contexts. The OED records the transfer to football (Freq. in the context of *Association Football*) with the first attestation attributed to Brian Clough in 1979, and thereafter records the spread into non-footballing contexts. Indeed, the spread is such that examples of *early doors* functioning as an adjective are increasingly common, both in footballing contexts and beyond:

> Bit of early doors team news: Fernando Torres starts for Liverpool for the first time in the league since the beginning of October[16]

> Some people have said it's the perfect place to stop, after work we go for an early doors drink, enjoy a meal from the extensive menu available[17]

This kind of transfer beyond the register, which we observed above as a feature of footballing cliché, will be of particular importance when discussing syntactic developments below.

STONEWALL n. attr.

As the OED states, is not simply a wall made out of stone, but a slightly more technical term referring to walls made without mortar, usually as a fence between fields. The term was then applied, chiefly through General "Stonewall" Jackson, to dogged resistance of various kinds, and subsequently to cricket, in Australian slang, to describe play of a particularly defensive nature, and thence to politics, meaning obstruction through overly lengthy speeches.

Something very curious would appear to have happened to the word in modern footballing parlance, where it is frequently used in collocation with the word "penalty", and without any apparent semantic relationship with the other uses just mentioned, as illustrated here:

> Derek was brought down for what we saw was a stonewall penalty. He did him for pace and was pulled down from behind. The Argus, 19/1/2011

A stonewall penalty is one that, in the eye of the beholder at least, is completely uncontroversial, manifest, one that cannot fail to be "given". Whatever the origin of this phrase, which must surely be based on some form of misanalysis, its rapid spread through the register of football is fascinating. The earliest attestation I can find is a question posed by a Guardian reader in 2000, which remains unresolved, as to the origin of the expression, which would seem to suggest it was recent at the time.[18] The attributive use of *stonewall* has extended in football to cover collocations such as stonewall freekick, stonewall throw-in and stonewall offside, and seems for the moment to be almost exclusively restricted to football (stonewall try and stonewall wicket produce very few hits on the Internet).

4. From the lexical to the phraseological

In this section, we move on to idioms and/or fixed expressions which are football related or football associated. Once again, it must be stressed that no attempt is being made here to address fundamental notions in the epistemology of phraseology. The aim is merely to point out, once again, that football is a field likely to delight lexicographers and phraseologists. I adopt here the definition of a phraseology proposed by Gries (2008:6): "a phraseologism is defined as the co-occurrence of a form or a lemma of a lexical item and one or more additional linguistic elements of various kinds which functions as one semantic unit… and whose frequency of co-occurrence is larger than expected on the basis of chance" and illustrate with three kinds of example:

> X AND Y
> N_1N_2 and $[N_1N_2]N_3$
> Fixed causal type expressions

BIBS AND CONES

This expression, which describes a football coach whose main emphasis is on training ground practice (in training, the two teams are often distinguished by having the players slip different coloured bibs over the tracksuit tops, and cones are used to delimit the playing area or form obstacles) rather than on public relations or transfer dealings, can be used attributively or epithetically as the following examples

> Had the pre-tournament casualty been Wayne Rooney, for instance, he would have been helpful around the squad, an eager bibs-and-cones man and a reminder of the importance of unselfishness in the team game at which England have not always been very good. Times Online, 15/5/2010[19]

> Having him around is great, because he's more bibs and cones than the last gaffer. Coventry Evening Telegraph, 14/3/2007

The same is true of the form of football known as *kick and rush* (see note 2) and of certain shots described as *hit and hope*. These are relatively ossified structures, inasmuch as "they kicked and rushed" or "they resorted to hitting and hoping" seem ill formed, and are indeed extremely rare.

CONSOLATION GOAL

This compound refers to a goal scored by a losing team in the dying seconds (itself a sporting phraseologism of sorts) of a match and which has no impact on the final result, and is a fine example of an N_1N_2 compound which is demonstrably not constructed in discourse, because it has ossified to the extent that N_2 can be omitted without a change in meaning, such as in the following example:

> Baker saw another effort pushed onto the post by home keeper Tom Bryce before Aaron Donaldson scored a consolation five minutes from time. Sunday Mercury, 30/1/2011

This is described by Leigh and Woodhouse (2006: 48), in sardonic fashion: "Note that the noun, one of many ossified terms in football, is preferred to the verb *to console*, usage of which would risk restoring actual meaning to the word." This usage is not recorded by the OED.

Other interesting examples of complex compounds in football, given as an indication of the variety of such forms in the footballing register, might be:

Route one (football)[20]
pub team stuff
want-away player
(end of season) run-in
a come-and-get-me plea

Finally, in this illustration of football as a source of phraseologisms, we come to clause-type expressions. The dividing line between these and clichés, as defined above, is of course hard to draw. *I'm as sick as a parrot* and *I'm over the moon* are phraseologisms which, as argued previously, have become clichés by virtue of being more frequently used outside a footballing context than within, and/or being signalled as self-consciously used by cues such as "proverbial" or "as they say". Phraseologisms which do not yet seem to have traversed the frontier, and which once again serve to illustrate the creativity or our much-maligned footballing friends, might be:

to go through a lean spell (often said of the striker who has gone several matches without scoring a goal

he has a great engine on him (used to describe somebody with high fitness levels)

to park the bus (in front of the area) (to pull the majority, if not all, of one's players into defence)

to get one's retaliation in early (a slightly sardonic way of referring to a foul)

5. From the phraseological to the grammatical

While there can be no doubt that the bulk of football register is composed of lexical items, phrases and clichés, as we have seen, there are also a number of intriguing examples of higher-level linguistic differences. We will focus here on three examples:

1. prepositional use
2. nonstandard parts tense morphology
3. narrative perfect

It is the latter of these that will form the basis of the "improbable hypothesis" referred to in the opening remarks to this article.

5.1. Prepositional use

5.1.1 Inside + *temporal complement*

As Ferguson (1983: 162) says: "most analyses of register give a great deal of attention to lexical specialization, but this is usually in terms of full lexemes...or fixed idiomatic phrases, rather than grammatical formatives." To support this contention, we cite two examples of "grammatical formatives", in our case prepositions, which are particularly worthy of note in the footballing register:

> "Scotland, needing a win, were a goal down inside 10 minutes." This usage, apparently particular to football, is favoured when things happen quickly (10 minutes often being the measure, it seems) and indeed "inside 10 minutes" maybe sounds quicker than "after nine minutes". It can therefore

serve quietly sardonic purposes, as in the example above. Leigh and Woodhouse (2006: 103)

While the lexicon from which the above quotation is taken, while impressive in its coverage and, it must be said, hugely entertaining in its handling of the subject matter, can only be taken as anecdotal evidence, it nevertheless appears to be backed up by the evidence research. Of the 927 hits on a search conducted on the Factiva website on 20/10/2011, for the string *inside ten minutes*, no fewer than 87% were football related. The use of *inside* as a preposition with a temporal complement is not recorded by the OED.[21]

5.1.2. Away to + *spatial complement*

More striking even than the foregoing is a second example of an unusual prepositional compound, once again picked up on by Leigh and Woodhouse (2006: 113): "For some reason, when referring to the visiting fans or a landmark near the ground, radio commentators always seem to say "away to our left" rather than just "to our left"." This intuition is once again supported by the evidence, this time much more strikingly so. A Factiva search conducted on 20/10/2011 produced a satisfyingly symmetrical count of 119 hits for the string *away to our/the left* and 118 for *away to our/the right*, every single one of which came from an article related to football. The OED contains no example of this use.

It must of course be stressed that I make neither of the following two claims:

1. that the compound spatial preposition *away to* originated of necessity in football commentary[22]
2. that it is exclusive to this field.

The claim is considerably more modest. It is that examples such as those we have seen, and those to come, have perhaps not been attributed sufficient importance, precisely because they are found most frequently in a register often given scant attention by many researchers in phraseology and related domains.

5.2. Irregular past tense morphology

Football is, or at least was until recently, almost the archetypal working-class sport, a factor which once cannot quite help but suspect has long played a part in its lack of coverage by linguists. Its importance in creating bonds in working class communities is well documented, and the fact is well known that most of its most successful players, because they begin their careers so young and are frequently talent spotted and nurtured long before they make their first appearance, have left formal education early. It should come as little surprise then that the speech of many footballers is rich in nonstandard features. However, it would be unusual to consider nonstandard morphology as forming part of register, were it not for the fact that one particular form, despite its prevalence in nonstandard dialects generally, has become inextricably linked to the world of football, to the extent that some speakers of English believe that only footballers use it.

Former footballer and TV pundit Mick Channon could hardly have suspected that when he pronounced judgement on England's centre forward after a match during the 1986 World Cup, he was, simply by using his own nonstandard past tense morphology, in the process of creating a new football cliché, one that bears all the hallmarks of clichés as defined above. "That boy Lineker done good" he said, and the phrase has stuck since, to the extent that it is regarded as "canonical" by Leigh and Woodhouse (2006: 219).

Recall that it was proposed above the cliché should be a self-consciously used expression amenable to creative manipulation. Channon's immortal lines have become just that. First of all, the exact string "the boy done good" itself is used in no fewer than 451 separate articles, found in a search on the Factiva database on 18/1/2011, of which only 83 (18.4%) were specifically tagged as football related, a sure sign of a nascent cliché. Examples include:

> If the boy done good, it's because he acquired the strength to shrug off his tough-love inheritance. A thought-provoking filial tour de force. The Daily Telegraph, review of stand-up show, 23/8/2010

> Grinning Unite union boss Derek Simpson told The Sun: "Our boy done good**.**" The Sun, article about Ed Milliband's victory as Labour leader, 29/9/2010

These two examples are therefore similar to the Rod Stewart example earlier on[23]

5.3. Syntactic cliché – a factor in language change?

The preceding remarks on the "boy done good" serve as the transition to this final section, in which it will tentatively be hypothesized that a particular football cliché involving a specific syntactic structure may be playing a role in an ongoing language shift.

When listening to a person involved with football, a player or a manager, it is not rare to hear examples such as the following:

> I'm proud of the players. It was a measure of our enthusiasm, guts, commitment, work ethic and discipline that we were not going to concede all afternoon unless it was something magical. We played with 10 players and Shay Given **hasn't** really made a save. Chris Hughton, manager of Newcastle United.

> In the incident that followed he then pushed young Butler and then followed in with his head. When you do that, you know the consequences. The referee has had no hesitation in sending him off and he was quite right. I am sure Dave Hodgson will be very disappointed with that lack of discipline in his two players. Brian Laws, manager of Scunthorpe United

What is striking here is the use of the present perfect, which would appear to be free variation with the preterit, to recount events that clearly belong to the past. There is of course a temptation to ascribe this use of the present perfect form[24] to a desire by the speaker to portray events as if belonging to the current moment, or at least as extremely recent. Indeed, in many cases, this recency is genuine, if the expression is used very example in a post-match interview. It is easy therefore to see this use of the present perfect as in some sense analogous to the use of the present simple and present progressive, frequently employed in recounting anecdotes, as is well documented. However, this analysis fails to account satisfactorily first of all for the apparently unmotivated switch from preterit to present perfect observable in both of the above examples, and second, and more importantly, for its use in recounting more temporally distant examples. The following is taken from a blog, dated 10th December 2005, and recounts a goal scored by Samuel Eto'o on 2nd November 2005, as Barcelona defeated Panathinaikos 5-0.[25]

> He doesn't put in a burst of pace to get into the D. He doesn't go towards the byline to cut in a cross. He doesn't hold up the ball. He's seen the keeper a bit off his line and hits the ball first time with the inside of his boot, over the keeper into the opposite corner of the goal. Sublime.[26]

This use of the present perfect to recount temporally distant events was also picked up on by journalist David McKie, in an article to which we will shortly return: "It [the use of the present perfect] seems even more incongruous when you come across it a whole week later, as you do these days at every level of football." (McKie 2002). Not only is this use of the present perfect for narrating football related events a frequent feature of the register (in a corpus of almost 400 football articles including verbatim transcripts of interviews, taken from the BBC's sports website, 96 contained this kind of use of the present perfect), there is also significant anecdotal evidence that this is a peculiarly football related usage. For example, Seddon, discussing players who recount events as they review them on a video replay, and prior to citing an example of present perfect use in this context, says (Seddon 2004: 221): "Most players…take refuge in a nether world between the past and the present, so what comes out is a unique brand of English."[27] Leigh and Woodhouse (2006: 93), also commenting on a similar example, comment: "When footballers talk us through a goal they've scored, the perfect tense is often preferred to a more conventional past historic. Such descriptions gain in immediacy what they might lose in accuracy."[28] And finally, McKie, in an article devoted entirely to this usage, claims: "The usage in football still seems awkward and odd. It doesn't happen with cricket." Strong circumstantial evidence, then, that for many observers, admittedly not linguists, but keen observers nonetheless, the narrative present perfect is a grammatical phenomenon which forms part of the register of football.

The claim, then, runs as follows: there is a relatively fixed syntactic frame, involving the use of the HAVE + past participle form, for recounting football-related events in the past. The frame is:

SUBJECT (football related) + HAVE + past participle + football related COMPLEMENT

Further research would need to be done in order to confirm the hypothesis that the present perfect is more frequent when the semantic

nature of either the subject or of the complement is football register associated. In other words, it is more common to find:

The keeper has had a nightmare
The referee had not seen the incident

than to find:

On the way here, the coach has broken down on the motorway
John has forgotten his passport, which is why we arrived late.

There is a danger here, of course, of circularity in the argument. If the claim that this is part of the football register is correct, then we should hardly be surprised to find it more frequently with other elements, lexical or phraseological, of football register. However, quantitative research might lend support to the notion that it is not fanciful to speak of a syntactic frame as forming part of the register, as the aforementioned observers would have it.

However, there is a second, and potentially somewhat contradictory claim that could be made here, which is as follows: although potentially originating in football, the narrative use of the present perfect has, by virtue of becoming something of a cliché, spread beyond the bounds of the football register into other registers and possibly farther afield, to the extent that it is actually having an effect on the tense system of British English as a whole. This is the improbable hypothesis referred to at the outset, and thus needs some immediate bolstering, if it is not to be dismissed out of hand.

The earliest narrative present perfect in my corpus dates back to 1999, and involves football. However, it is to be found in other sports, too, these examples taken respectively from horse-racing and snooker:

> On the run-in she was heading left towards the parade ring so I pulled my stick through to give her a smack on the left side, and she has then gone the other way, and I lost my balance. The Guardian 15/1/09

> I came out afterwards, and I had three difficult shots, all 3 of which I've missed, and Steve then's gone break break break and it looked like it was going to be 8-7, and then he fell down and makes 57 points and I've managed to clear the table and I'm absolutely delighted. Snooker player Steve Davis commenting on being in the final of the UK Championship, 2006, television interview (BBC).

McKie (2002) concludes: “What worries me is that the practice may spread.” His worst fears would seem to be being confirmed. The narrative present perfect is to be found in general speech, with no connection of any kind with the sporting world, as the following extract from a sketch by British comedienne Catherine Tate exemplifies:

> An absolutely mental day-to-day, you’ll never believe it. Lunchtime, right, Elaine said to me “what do you fancy?” And I said I was thinking about a jacket potato and she said “I’ve half a mind to go to Prêt à Manger” and I said “why don’t I walk down with you ‘cos it’s on the same way.” In the end we’ve ended up sharing a jacket potato, cottage cheese and a salad so it’s all worked out quite well. We’ve gone back to work, we’ve got in the lift, next thing I know, the lift’s stopped, the doors have opened, she’s walked out, I’ve followed her out, I’ve taken one look around me – I’m only on the fifth floor ain’t I? I’m only on the fifth floor in human resources instead of the third floor in personnel [...] We have gone into uncontrollable hysterics. She said “what you doin’ up here”, I said “you know what I’ve done, doncha? I’ve only gone and followed you”. She said to me “you’re a lunatic!

How extensive this narrative perfect will become of course remains to be seen, but it is hard not to see parallels with what has happened in other languages, such as French and German, whereby the periphrastic have-perfect, with the auxiliaries *avoir* and *haben* respectively, have gradually come to supplant the simple past forms in their narrative usage, to the extent that in both languages, the simple past form is unusual (in German) or practically impossible (in French) in the spoken language.

6. Conclusion

This article began with a threefold aim, first that of illustrating the potential that football register has for further investigation by lexicologists and phraseologists, and indeed by lexicographers, as it must be observed that there currently exists no reference dictionary devoted to sport in general, in the same way as there are dictionaries of law, medicine and journalism, for instance. Second, to bestow a little nobility on the oft-derided and lowly notion of cliché, which can be seen as a phraseologism which allows for a considerable degree of compositionality, by virtue of its becoming more *associated* with a particular register than genuinely *being* a part thereof. As

such, further study of cliché, as defined here, might prove useful in assessing the part that compositionality has to play in our definitions of phraseologisms, a much debated issue, of course. And finally, to put forward (though, crucially, not necessarily to endorse) the hypothesis that in some cases of extremely high frequency usage, and football is nothing if not hugely over exposed in the media, a given syntactic frame that is part of a specific register may, through becoming clichéd, rapidly spread further afield and begin to affect the language as a whole. There has been extensive work recently on the effects of frequency on language change (Bybee and Hopper 2001 for a useful overview), and this may be another example of just this sort of phenomenon.

There are enormous difficulties for such a hypothesis. The first is that it requires a specific register, that of football, to have given rise to a highly marked syntactic frame. On the face of it, this is highly improbable. We are comfortable with the notion of gradual syntactic change over time, naturally, much less so that the origin of such change could be pinpointed so accurately, and perhaps even less so still that it might be footballers! But improbability is not a reason for not investigating the matter further. True, it is more likely that the phenomenon is a feature of working class speech, a set of dialects that have been thrust into the limelight somewhat with the success of football, and we are therefore observing it *through* football, rather than because it was born in football. A factor that might mitigate against this, however, is that it seems to be a pan-British phenomenon, as the corpus includes speakers from Scotland, Wales and all parts of England, all of whom use the narrative present perfect and whose only linguistic connection is that they share the register of football. Research, then needs to be undertaken on the history of this linguistic change, if indeed it is one, before we can safely say that the footballing register, for all the interesting phraseological titbits it throws up and for all the clichés it has spawned and that we use every day, has not had any effect on the structure of the language as a whole.

Notes

[1] Beard 1998, despite its promising title, is in fact a school textbook for textual and conversational analysis, which offers little for the lexicographer or phraseologist. A notable exception is Lavric et al. 2008

[2] This is by no means a criticism of the OED. After all, apart from all of its other obvious merits, a dictionary which defines *kick-and-rush*, as an attributive phrase used to "describe football played with more vigour than art" deserves gushing praise!

[3] To it's credit, the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations (Knowles 2004) does record this for posterity

[4] Leigh and Woodhouse 2006, a work that we shall be returning to in the course of this article, and Seddon 2004 are good examples of this trend. Seddon is a fanatic Derby County fan and an author of many books, on football and a variety of other subjects, and while his books are very informed and above criticism, he is no linguist. Woodhouse and Leigh have combined to compile a number of glossaries, including cricket and racing.

[5] The classic source, now, for such discussion, is Biber & Conrad 2009, where we read (21): "It is important to be aware that there is no general consensus concerning the use of register and related terms such as genre and style."

[6] It is perhaps no coincidence that Ferguson (1983), which is something of a classic in the literature on register, is also sports related, although it focuses specifically on the language of sports commentators, particularly radio broadcasters. The focus in this article is wider, covering everybody involved in football, from players and managers through to fans, via television commentators.

[7] "That-omission co-occurs with these stance features, suggesting that they are usually used in *colloquial* rather than *formal registers*." (Biber & Conrad, 2009: 237)
"the *registers* employed in modern journalism vary according to the sector of the market in particular publication is aiming to reach. The popular and tabloid press tends to use short, highly emotive low register terms like *slam*, *slate*, *blast* and *ban*, while these serious or responsible press uses a more *sober style*." (Hughes 2008: 50). In both quotes, the emphasis is mine. It seems preferable, if only for expository reasons, to maintain a distinction between *style* and *register*, and it seems unhelpful that they should be used almost synonymously by Hughes in the above quote.

[8] A Google Books search 20/01/2010: "be a cliché" 5,050 hits; "is a cliché" 20,800; "become a cliché" 18,400; "becomes a cliché" 1,160. The usual caveats apply, of course, to results such as these, which are raw Google hits.

[9] As the following discussion will make clear, there is no real clear dividing line between the two. But in linguistics, we are surely well used to the absence of clear dividing lines!

[10] http://heydeadguy.typepad.com/heydeadguy/2008/11/its-a-game-of-two-halves-brian.html

[11] Song to be found on the album Sportchestra: 101 Songs about Sport, in collaboration with other artists.

[12] http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/rock-a-show-of-two-halves-rod-1523858.html

[13] Recall that one of the hallmarks of cliché, as defined here, is that it goes beyond register bounds.

[14] There was a greater number of strings "ship water", but the majority of these used "ship" as a synonym of "transport", which is clearly not the sense we are interested in.

[15] More recently, Atkinson has come under some scrutiny for less savoury aspects of his language use, with a number of racist comments made off-air being caught on microphone and made publicly known.

[16] http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/eng_prem/7741763.stm 25/1/2011)

[17] http://redbullstockport.blogspot.com/ 25/1/2010

[18] http://www.guardian.co.uk/football/2000/dec/13/newsstory.sport5

[19] Almost frequent is the extended form "balls, bibs and cones man", sometimes known as the BBC, particularly when referring to manager Avram Grant: "He may be known as the BBC (balls, bibs and cones) man, but at least Avram Grant silenced his critics temporarily this morning. The Israeli earned the nickname during his time at Portsmouth, where he was carrying training equipment more than offering his expert technical views as director of football." Asiaone.com, 5/10/2007

[20] Both Leigh and Woodehouse (2006: 167) and Seddon (2004: 200) attribute this to the name of the 1970's television quiz programme *Route One*, in which contestants could opt for one difficult question (the route one question) rather than four simpler questions. The OED, which has an entry for *Route One*, makes no mention of such an etymology.

[21] It must be noted that a parallel search, this time using Google Books and the string *inside 5 minutes* offers many hits (an exact number is difficult to establish, since the raw data includes strings such as I stayed inside 5 minutes, which are clearly irrelevant to our purposes). Some of them date back to 1884 "I was hungry for trout, and *inside five minutes* I had drawn my prize up to and on that gravelly beach, had him by the gills, and he was seventeen inches flush, big as Mr. Murray's and no fuss about it." France, Lewis B. 1884. *With rod and line in Colorado waters*. Chain, Hardy & Co., page 32.

[22] It is important to note that *away to* is a spatial proposition in the uses under discussion. It is relatively easy to find strings such as "away to the right" as complements of verbs of movement, such as *heading, walking, driving* etc.

[23] Much could also be made of the adverbial use of *good* in this phrase, which has also become somewhat associated with football, but this would take us away from the central point, to follow, on aspectual use.

[24] The expression *present perfect form* here is used in order to remain agnostic as to whether we are dealing with a tense or an aspect.

[25]That an attested example from football was not found in the course of this research is, naturally, disappointing, but I would surmise that is more due to the inherent difficulty of devising a relevant search strategy than to the inexistence of the phenomenon. Searches involving (in)famous football incidents, such as the controversial third goal for England in the 1966 World Cup Final, or Maradona's "Hand of God" goal for Argentina against England in 1986 were tried, but to no avail. One of the non-footballing examples given later does, however, involve distant past.

[26] http://introvertedself.blogspot.com/2005_12_01_archive.html - visited on 30/1/2011

[27]Seddon is incorrect to associate this present perfect use with video replays, as they are almost never involved in the examples from the aforementioned corpus. For a similar claim, see also Rastall (1999)

[28]There is no doubt from the context that the author's "present tense" refers to the present perfect form.

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