

Fan identity and football culture: locating variation in the discursive performance of football fan identities in a UK stadium

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we critically assess a common discourse of the football fan as hooligan, with the help of insights generated from a linguistic ethnography of football fan behaviour in one of their natural environments – the football stadium during a live match. Football fans have long been stereotypically understood through notions of hooliganism, with violent and aggressive behaviour frequently identified as a marker of this social group. However, researchers like Gary Armstrong have begun to problematize these discourses, claiming that only a tiny minority of football fans are in fact violent. In this article, we contribute to these efforts by drawing on insights gathered from a linguistic ethnography of football fans at an English, League 1 professional football club – Burton Albion Football Club. Researchers collected over 10 h of observational data, primarily in the form of field notes that documented all manner of fan behaviour – including songs, talk directed at players on the field, interactions amongst fans, reactions to on field events – across different sections of the stadium. The findings not only challenge the stereotypical notion of the football fan as hooligan, but they also highlight distinct subcultures being constructed within the same stadium through different behavioural tendencies and expectations regarding acceptable behaviour. These findings not only illustrate that the view of football fans as hooligans is uncritical and unsophisticated, but that our broader understanding of football fans is under theorized. Empirical insights of the kind provided by linguistic ethnographic work can help to challenge unchecked discourses about football fans that are perpetuated without a well-founded evidence base and help locate new dimensions for studying this important group of people in the wider football landscape.

Introduction

“[...] the biggest challenge I lay down is around the culture that led some individuals on the day at Wembley, and in the days after on social media, to choose to behave in this way. What makes people believe that it is somehow acceptable to break into a stadium or abuse disabled entrances just because it is a big match or there are spare seats inside?”¹

Stereotypical understandings of football fans and the cultural values they reflect and reconstruct at football games are not flattering.² Associations with hooliganism are frequently attached to the identity of the football fan, and the news media appear to primarily orient to this subject position

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when reporting on the actions of fans within stadiums. A recent report into the events of the Euro 2020 final at Wembley, quoted above, even went as far as to suggest that the fan culture at games is one of the biggest challenges football authorities must face.³

However, while it is clear that the behaviour of some sections of football crowds needs confronting, this study will support existing claims that discourses of football (stadium) culture are overly simplistic and conflate significant nuances in the way football fans perform their fan identities.⁴ We will support these claims by presenting empirical evidence from a linguistic ethnography of football fan behaviour in a United Kingdom League One football club (Burton Albion Football Club). Linguistic and discourse analytical tools are emerging as a significant resource in the social sciences for theorists wanting to test or challenge widely held understandings of cultural groups by collecting and studying empirical evidence in the form of linguistic behaviour people exhibit when engaged in their cultural activities. In this study, we adopt this toolkit to shine a light on the linguistic behaviour of football fans as they are engaged in the activity of supporting their team in their stadium, arguably the most spiritual and important site for football fans.

What we will demonstrate from our comparative analysis of linguistic behaviour is that even within a single stadium there is evidence of variation in the way different groups of football fans (operationalized here as different physical segments of the crowd) perform their identities as fans in the stadium. We will claim that the observed variation in identity performances requires us to consider football fan culture not as a monolithic cultural entity, but as a series of subcultures, sharing some core belief systems across different subcultures but ultimately operating on different understandings of the normative ways in which to exercise their fan identities.

Subcultures in the stadium

While discourses about fans perpetuate a “reality” of the football fan as hooligan, a small amount of research is starting to critically assess these underlying assumptions.⁵ Armstrong⁶ asserts that grouping all football supporters under the term *hooligans*, and assuming all construct violent and aggressive identities is problematic and that only a tiny minority are in fact violent. This leaves open the question as to what other subject positions fans construct, individually or collectively, as and when they enact their identities as football fans.

Some previous research has attempted to understand how fans vary in the way they perceive or construct themselves. For Robson,⁷ who carried out an ethnography of Millwall FC supporters in the UK, fans can vary in the degree to which they demonstrate a close affiliation or involvement with the club. He found that fans could be placed on a continuum based on their personal affinity to the club. Many did not have the depth of personal involvement with Millwall and so particular demonstrations of close identity to the club were not so important for these individuals.⁸ It therefore seems uncritical to perceive football fans as a homogenous group with identical motivations, desires and expectations.

Similarly, Madrigal⁹ draws distinctions between (groups of) fans based on their involvement with and psychological connection to a team. High identifiers with the club associate more closely with the team being instrumental to their identity.¹⁰ For them, fans can be seen to adopt the team as a part of their extended self. In contrast, low identifiers may publicly comply with group norms to be accepted by others.¹¹ Low identifiers appear to enjoy a winning team environment and so supporters engage in processes known as BIRGing, basking in reflected glory, and CORFing, cutting off reflective failures.¹² BIRGing explains that individuals wish to emphasize their relation to the success of others even when they have played no role in the success¹³ while CORFing involves distancing oneself from the failure of others.¹⁴

Other studies have sought to typologize fans according to the different spectator identities that have emerged within football's new hyper-commodified political economy. Giulianotti's taxonomy, for example, approaches the task of organizing different types of fans by considering variation in the nature of their relationship to the game of football and the clubs they support.¹⁵ For Giulianotti,

four distinctive spectator identities can be drawn based from within football's political economy – *supporter*, *follower*, *fan*, and *flaneur* – with each of these identities differing in complex and nuanced ways according to the degree of investment in and loyalty to the clubs they support.¹⁶

Previous research has also problematized what counts as hooliganism when considering the behaviour and identities of football fans. Pearson,¹⁷ in his study at Blackpool FC in the UK, found that a particular group of fans within the Blackpool stadium which he identified as “carnival fans” were often perceived as hooligans by those outside the culture due to their obnoxious behaviour or the fact that they were often seen accompanying hooligans. However, his experience within the culture showed the different intentions of these fans which distanced them from hooligans.¹⁸ He found that they were instrumental in creating atmosphere at matches through “chanting, swaying, surging and showing colours”.¹⁹

What the above studies show is that there is much to learn when we scratch below the surface of the cultural category of football fans, and that uncritically ascribing the identity of hooligan to members of this cultural group unfairly conflates cultural nuance that might help us to better understand football culture. In this study, we contribute to the work of unpacking fan culture by attempting to locate variation in the ways stadium goers actually construct their identities as football fans by shining a light on the linguistic practices that fans deploy as they go about the task of supporting their team in the stadium. From a close analysis of these linguistic and non-verbal behaviours, we can provide the basis for a more nuanced discussion of fan culture by evidencing variation in the way this culture or its subcultures are being enacted. In the next section, we unpack the close connection between discourse, identity and culture – three concepts that are central to the conceptual work we attempt in this study.

Locating football fan culture in action: culture, identity and discourse

In the current study, we bring together the notions of “culture” (or subcultures), “identity” – more precisely, football fan culture (in the stadium) and football fan identities – and “discourse” or fan language use in the stadium to offer a close look at the variable ways fan culture is constructed in a football stadium.

For discourse analysts and sociolinguists, culture, identity and discourse are tightly interconnected notions, with each informing and constructing the other.²⁰ Culture, as a series of values and beliefs systems, can be seen to impose on or, at the very least, influence the behaviour people exhibit in their (cultural) groups. This process can, in turn, influence how people see and understand themselves (their identities) and provide them with an interpretive mechanism through which to behave (discursively) and identify people similar to them and judge those who are not. However, it is important to note that this interconnection between discursive behaviour, identity and culture is simultaneously working in the other direction, whereby the identity performances of individuals, constructed in and through certain discursive behaviours, can be seen to (re)constitute or (re)construct cultures and values.²¹ New behaviours exhibited by cultural members can, therefore, be seen to dynamically confirm, challenge and reshape understandings of self and constitute the everchanging and dynamic cultures to which they claim belonging.²²

For many sociolinguists, discourse analysts and linguistic ethnographers, it is the latter direction that frames a lot of their empirical studies of social life.²³ Sociolinguists, discourse analysts and linguistic ethnographers all share an interest in the performative nature of social and cultural life. They take the position that culture is something people enact in their everyday lives and that the behaviour that members of a cultural group exhibit can be seen as a reflection and a (re)construction of their understanding of their culture and the normative ways through which to behave appropriately and lay claim to their identity as a member of that culture. For these researchers, the language people use is a valuable source of empirical data for pinning down more complex and abstract beliefs, values and shared understandings that group people together and coordinate their behavioural norms.²⁴

In this study we use these notions of culture, identity and discourse to describe and interpret the behaviour of football fans, particularly the audible behaviour directed at the players (their own and opposition), other fans and officials, as they perform their fan identities (for each other) in the stadium. This locating job, where sociolinguistic observations of authentic language in use can be collected and analysed to pin down often complex and abstract understandings of social and cultural life, is a strength of the discourse analytical toolkit and one that has been applied to a variety of sporting contexts.²⁵ Therefore, an important goal of this article is to demonstrate this toolkit, particularly for readers less accustomed with the work of sociolinguists. However, more broadly, it is our aim to contribute discussions of football fan identity and stadium culture by providing evidence-driven claims about variation in the performance of fan identities and the cultural potential of football fans. In doing so, we aim to answer calls for greater amounts of theory-led empirical research into football fan culture.²⁶ With the concept of sociolinguistic performativity within football crowd identity construction remains relatively untouched we hope the work we present in this chapter opens up a useful space for further and more targeted research on the linguistic practices of fans in their natural environments.

Employing a linguistic ethnography to understand cultural practices

In this study we employed a linguistic ethnography to help us collect data for our analysis of the discursive performance of football fan culture. Ethnographic research has long been used to study the practices of socially or culturally bound groups.²⁷ Originally developed in the early twentieth century as a tool for observing and reporting on non-Western communities and cultures,²⁸ it has now emerged as a familiar research approach relied on by sociologists, sociolinguists and anthropologists to shine a light on the behaviours and practices evident within any coherent, recognizable, bounded group of people.²⁹

Observation is the central data collection technique with ethnographers aiming to embed themselves within a cultural group that interests them and thus attempt to document the taken-for-granted behaviours members of that cultural group demonstrate as they engage in their shared activities. For linguistic ethnographers, there is an emphasis on behaviours that are linguistically enacted or performed as, at least for these researchers, language sits at the epicentre of all social exercises.³⁰ In this tradition, linguistic behaviours are not viewed as random but are understood as culturally significant and purposeful. They are grounded in, amongst other things, collective demonstrations and understandings of appropriate or expected linguistic and other behaviour.

From a view of language as a cultural phenomenon, linguistic ethnographers use close descriptions of discourse (or linguistic behaviour) to inform empirically grounded theories of culture, with a particular emphasis on the significance of specific, culturally relevant “signs” underlining links to important social structures.³¹ For our study, the application of linguistic ethnography involved the systematic observation of the discursive behaviour of fans – in the context of supporting their team – in a football stadium and the use of these observations to build claims about identity performances and the shared cultural understandings that were being demonstrated in the process.

Population, sample and data collection

The club and stadium in which we carried out our observations was Burton Albion Football Club (BAFC), at the time a professional English football club in the third division of English Football (League 1). After receiving clearance to attend matches and collect generalized observations of fan behaviour from a club official, one of the researchers attended four home matches at the Pirelli Stadium over the course of a two-month period. This period gave the researcher a chance to space out observations and process data as it was being collected. The processing of data after individual matches helped to guide more purpose-

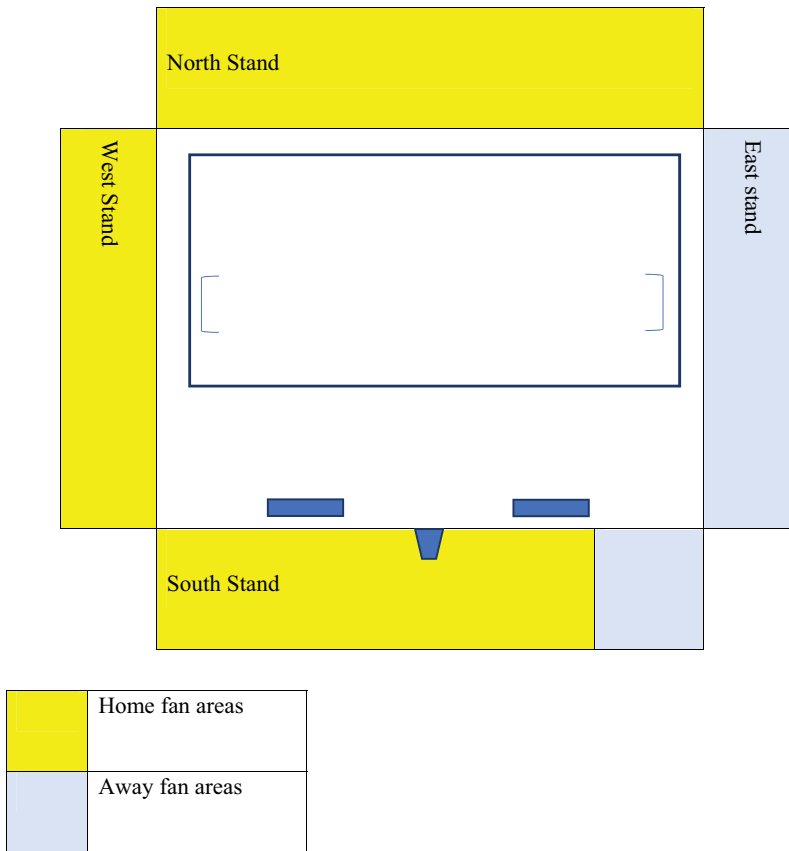


Figure 1. Outline of the four stands vis-à-vis the pitch.

driven observation in subsequent matches. The fixtures the researcher attended were home matches against Northampton Town, Fleetwood Town, Accrington Stanley and Peterborough United. The game against Northampton Town was an FA Cup 3rd round match but the others were league games.

Importantly for this study, there were three stands in the stadium that we focused on and that became central to the discussions we have here: the West Stand, the North Stand and the South Stand (the East Stand was reserved for the opposition's fans and was not explored in this study). [Figure 1](#) below provides a schematic plan of the stadium and the positions of these four stands vis-à-vis the pitch.

The data set consists of a collection of observations of communicative behaviour BAFC fans exhibited while engaged in the activity of supporting their team in their natural setting, the Pirelli Stadium. We spent the earlier observations locating broadly observable linguistic systems, evident in the stadium communication of fans, that might prove useful for the comparative work we set out to accomplish. Of particular interest were observations of chanting, interactions fans had with one another, and the “interaction” fans directed at players and referees on the pitch. This emphasis on communication on a crowd level towards players, the opposition, and officials, in the form of shouts and chants as the form and function of fans' language use is instrumental for understanding how fans construct their identities when engaged in the activity of supporting their team.³²

We were able to locate systems of language use that proved useful for explicating variation in the performance of fan identities across the stadium. [Table 1](#) below summarizes these key linguistic systems which were observable in the communication of fans in the Pirelli Stadium.

Table 1. Broadly observable linguistic practices of fan communication in the stadium.

- Chanting and singing
- Dialogue with other fans
- Attempted dialogue (or perhaps monologue) with those on the pitch
- Coordination of verbal action
- Length (extent) of turns or interactions
- Topic of talk
- Volume of talk
- Observable speech acts
- Directness/indirectness of these speech acts
- Mitigation of speech acts
- Shape/design of assessments or acts of evaluation

As might be gauged from [Table 1](#), our observations of discursive behaviour remained quite broad and sought to locate general communicative behaviour at a crowd or group level. Keeping our observations at a broader, crowd level was a decision that was made based primarily on ethical concerns and considerations. Because the consent form process for the crowd was unmanageable, with over 3,000 fans regularly attending matches, observations were limited to field notes and voice memo reflections on an iPhone. We were also wary of drawing undue attention to ourselves as an outsider with recorders or being seen to be surreptitiously recording fans. As a result, we were limited in the degree to which we could carry out a fine-grained linguistic analysis. However, we were still able to collect a useful set of observations capable of developing an empirical account of fan behaviour across the Pirelli Stadium.

Narrowing our focus: locating and accounting for variation across the stadium

As mentioned above, data was analysed after each match which contributed to a gradual honing of focus. We started by taking “a wide angled view”³³ looking at all manner of taken-for-granted practices that members of the culture exhibited in the course of this cultural activity of supporting their team. However, the main drive for this project emerged as the researcher observing became conscious of the different way they felt as they moved around the three different stands of the Pirelli stadium. This raised the question that lies at the heart of this study – what behavioural or, in our case, discursive differences are leading to different perceptions and feelings.

This comparative approach of analysing fan behaviour in different stands finds support in previous research. Armstrong³⁴ highlights how different groups of supporters could be located by the specific areas of the stadium in which they congregated (Sheffield United, Bramall Lane). These locations were known historically among supporters and hence people sat with others with whom they felt they belonged.³⁵ For example, at the Shoreham End, one would find the “Kops” who were rough and uncouth, often working-class males, while the John Street Stand was home to the elderly “thermos flask and blanket brigade”.³⁶

So, while data collection remained committed to documenting all manner of linguistically enacted behaviour, the analysis took a more comparative angle, aiming to locate similarities and differences in the behaviour by groups of people occupying the West Stand, the North Stand and the South Stand of the stadium. Using these different stands in the stadium as the basis for our comparative analyses of fan behaviour, we set out to build an understanding of the identity performances of fans in these different sections of the stadium. To do this we needed to identify linguistic practices, capable of being observed from a distance, that differed across these three stands and could usefully be used to investigate the ways in which fans constructed their identities in the stadium. In the next section, we present several of the more prominent findings from our comparative analysis of the discursive behaviour in these three stands, before going on to consider what these findings mean for the wider issue of understanding football fan culture.

Locating the cultural potential of football fans in the stadium

Before illustrating the variation across the different stands, it is important to note some of the behaviours that we observed across all of the different stands. Many of these, however, were non-verbally enacted, showing, for example, a general awareness of the importance of cultural artefacts. One of the most obvious and taken-for-granted of these was the wearing of coordinated clothing that bore BAFC's colours – yellow and black. This included the team's official merchandise of supporter shirts, current and past, bearing the club's logo and sponsors, or their own clothing of the colour of the club. While not everyone was dressed in yellow and black, this very evident coordination across members of the fan community, and across the different stands within the stadium, points to a shared understanding of the importance of explicitly marking or performing your identity as a Burton Albion fan when gathered in the stadium through means that allow this (like clothing). Such a practice likely helps individuals claim membership to the group and gain immediate rapport with others in a setting where many people are otherwise strangers.

There was also a shared understanding of the significance of certain happenings and events during a football match and the consequences for BAFC. At a general level (and we unpack nuances further below), emotional reactions were performed in a coordinated fashion across the different home supporter stands of the stadium as goals were scored (by or against BAFC), when refereeing decisions went in favour or against BAFC and when the behaviour of their own or the opposition's players was deemed positive or negative. Emotional displays appeared to be an important layer of cultural meaning that individuals would draw on in the course of a match. Jointly performing a coordinated display of emotions of happiness or disappointment, for example, was not only a way fans could perform their more general expert identity as a football fan who knows the game and understands the significant moments of a football game, but also a way they could perform their allegiance to BAFC by indicating their understanding of the significance of these moments for their team.

However, it was the variation, particularly in the verbal performance of fan identities, that grabbed the researcher's attention and helped exemplify the variation felt as they circulated the different stands of the stadium. We will focus on pinning down this variation by locating key features of talk observed in and across the three different stands.

West stand supporters: the fanatics

The identity performances by fans in the West Stand, situated behind one of the goals (see [Figure 1](#) above), contained a distinct type of Burton fan, one we might label the 'impassioned fan' – or **the fanatics** – based on the zealous performance of their support for the team. More generally, much in the same way as Pearson's³⁷ carnival fans, it was this stand that generated the most noise amongst the home fans and that demonstrated the greatest degree of coordination in their collective verbal actions. There was a drummer in this stand who was a powerful character in this subculture. He dictated the chanting and the levels of volume in this stand. Surrounding supporters usually looked to him for the lead. Songs and chants were frequently initiated by the members of this stand across a match, often emerging as significant events in the match occurred. For example, if BAFC did score, all fans in the stadium would jump, cheer, clap and the West Stand would start the coordinated chanting reproduced in (1).

(1) Ah oh ah oh ah oh ah oh ah oh ohhhohhhohhhh BREWERS

We follow you, YELLOW YELLOW

Nah nahnahnahnahnahnahnahnahnahnah Liam Liam Boyce, Liam Boyce, Liam Liam Boyce

(Chant to tune of *Give it up* by KC & The Sunshine Band)

Outside of chanting and signing, much of the observable verbal behaviour from these fans took the form of directives that were addressed to actual actors on the field – the BAFC players, the

opposition players and the referee and linesmen/lineswomen, see (2). Because of the volume with which these communicative acts were performed, it was apparent that these directives were, on the one hand, designed as if they were attempts to (ideally) be heard by and to influence these actors on the field. From this perspective, we could argue that they could be considered as attempts to motivate or direct their own players and deride or distract the opposition.

- (2)-Keep going boys come on!
- Use your pace, Johnny
- Upend him!
- Get up you twat
- Get back!
- Go on Ollie
- Take your time {i.e. inviting players to waste time purposefully}
- Bang it top bin!

It was evident in our observations that the referee was subject to the most attention by the supporters in this stand. The referee was the designated audience of a number of fan speech acts, including questions, directives and statements. However, all of these speech actions performed a similar evaluative function, negatively interpreting the performance and professional identity or capability of the referee. A sample of these speech act can be seen in (3).

- (3)-Can you watch the fucking game?
- You're a fucking twat
- Are you even fucking watching?
- Send yourself off ref
- You're a fucking joke ref
- Cheating scum ref

The increased volume marked intensity behind the messages coming from this stand, suggesting that this group of fans were distinguishing themselves as more fervent. This interpretation might also be supported by the evidence that many of these directives were unmitigated and at times aggressive in nature, particularly those that were directed at their own players to act out on opposition players (i.e. *upend him*) or the strength of negative adjectives and categories (i.e. *a joke, scum*) ascribed to the referee and their performance.

While these loudly articulated directives can be seen to function as attempts to impact the action on the pitch in some way, they are also simultaneously functioning as attempts by speakers to be heard by those fans around them and to claim what appears to be an impassioned West Stand fan identity in the process. In much of the same way that singing and chanting was coordinated by individuals in this group, these directives would also achieve degrees of coordination as multiple fans would perform similar directives at once as a particular match event unfolded. This coordination and building on one another arguably functioned to create and show greater degrees of togetherness and solidarity amongst the supporters in this stand.

For this stand of fans, the context of the match seemed significant in organizing and shaping the behaviour of individuals and how they constructed their identities as BAFC supporters in their stadium. Fans did not appear to engage in significant amounts of small talk with those around them (perhaps because of the volume). Rather, they focused on coordinating their collective actions – be it chanting, issuing directives to their players or pejoratively evaluating the referee – based on the

circumstances of the match. Such behaviour perhaps also functions to directly index for those in this stand and in other stands that they are the serious fans who are there to watch the football.

North stand supporters: the reserved

By contrast, the North Stand fans were less obviously and outwardly vocal. This, by chance or design, created the conditions for a greater number of smaller, private interactions amongst the groups of fans who were better able to hear one another and were not necessarily committed to coordinating and performing a vocal, collective identity for the wider community. We have settled here on the category label of **the reserved** to classify this group.

During the match, fans in the North Stand would regularly talk in smaller circles and engage in more extensive episodes of evaluative commentary on the team and players in the team. Long stretches of talk were observable in this stand, and fans would partake in interactions not only about the current game but also about previous games and previous seasons as exemplified in (4) and (5).

(4) Do you remember when Lucas [Akins, a Burton striker] burst onto the scene? He hasn't really lit up the pitch much since.

(5) Nobody really stands out in the league. Apart from Southend, you can't tell the difference between the top of the table and the bottom.

The fans in the North Stand would also position themselves, usually indirectly and not pejoratively, in opposition to the West Stand fans, by remarking about the differences in the way fans in this stand behaved, usually noting the more vociferous behaviour of the West Stand fans in their interactions with one another, see (6).

(6) Off they go + right on cue (North Stand supporter talking about West Stand who have just initiated a chant)

However, what was perhaps most evident in this stand was the greater orientation towards dialogue between the fans as opposed to attempted dialogue with the actors on the pitch. It was also apparent in these interactions that the fans demonstrated a preference for shaping their identities more around notions of football expertise. While engaged in the process of watching and supporting their team, fans in this stand would be engaged in evaluating the match, discussing strategy, and comparing the current team and players with reference to the past. One feature of talk that was heard across different interactions in this stand (and perhaps supports this conclusion) was the frequent use of the question tag *isn't it* as the extracts in (7) and (8) illustrate.

(7) A: It really is atrocious football

B: It is, isn't it?

(8) A: Terrible place to give a free kick away

B: Terrible, isn't it?

This was a frequent feature of interactions amongst fans in the North Stand and perhaps highlights how important evaluative exchanges of opinion – exchanges that helped the interactants co-construct their expert identities – were for the social interaction between these fans. The frequent use of these sequential pairs shows one speaker expressing an evaluative opinion on the match, one that lays claim to a certain degree of expertise needed to validly make or support such an opinion, and the other interactant supporting these claims and, in the process, constructing their own identity as an expert.

Perhaps as an explanation for the differences registered in the discursive norms of fans in this stand is the general demographic observation that the North Stand was typically populated by older males who, from observations of their conversations, had been supporters of the club for a long time. It may be that this intersection of identity variables – age, gender and a long-standing and

experienced supporter of club – that helps to explain the discursive features we observed. Fans in the North Stand distinguish themselves as the older, wiser and more experienced members of the fan community, and construct their identities along these lines.

South stand supporters: the detractors

While the linguistic behaviour in the West and North stands demonstrated some clear and distinguishable patterns, the behaviour of fans in the South stand was more varied. Again, potential explanations for this variation may lie in the observed demographic and seating arrangements in this stand. This was the only fully seated stand in the stadium and, perhaps consequently, it comprised of a mixed demographic of families, elderly couples, and corporate guests, amongst other groups who may have preferred to sit. For the researcher, this stand felt like the most accommodating place to come as a “new supporter”. Attendees of the South Stand were not under pressure to lead or join in with chants and songs that would require them to know the rhythm and lyrics, nor were they required to construct themselves as experts of the game or club by citing prior knowledge about the club or putting their evaluations on record.

However, there are two patterns worth noting here that were more evident in fan behaviour in this stand. One feature concerned the degree of expert knowledge evident in fan communication. As in the North Stand, fans in this stand appeared to value and orient to expert knowledge of football; however, in this case, their expert remarks were more readily addressed at the players and coaches, usually in the form of directives to take tactical action, see (9).

(9)-Come on get it wide

-Go on counter + counter

-Play for the whistle for God's sake

As outlined above, expertise was the cultural capital of fans in the North Stand but in that stand it was primarily shared amongst groups of fans as they conversed with one another. In the South stand, this was more evidently directed at players and presumably coaches who, incidentally, sat in closer proximity to these fans in team dugouts on the Southern side of the stadium. Such behaviour, due to its very public nature, is arguably evidence of a stronger claim to an expert identity.

Another pattern concerned the stronger degree to which the fans in this stand designed their evaluations or assessments of their own players, particularly when venting their frustrations to one another about and during the match. There were examples in the data collected from this stand of fans using strong, negative adjectives to describe the behaviour and capabilities of BAFC players, as the examples in (10) suggest.

(10) -Our keeper's just shocking

-We've got two donkeys up front

-Why can't we finish?

-Fuck's sake, we're such a shit team

-Don't think we're coming back after that goal

-We're going to watch the Liverpool game [voiced by a spectator when leaving the match early]

This linguistic practice is perhaps evidence of fans in the South Stand indexing more of a highly expectant fan identity, marked by an orientation to overly critical stances towards the errant performances of their own team. We have drawn on the label **the detractors** to categorize this group, drawing mainly on the overtly critical stances these fans took. Like fans in other stands, the

supporters in the South Stand seemed to present a close affiliation with the club when BAFC were playing well (applauding good tackles, applauding good chances and cheering and joining in with West Stand chants when things were going well). However, conversely, when things were going badly for Burton, these supporters arguably discursively distanced themselves from the club, in some cases even leaving before the match had finished.

Comparison of chanting in the stadium

Finally, with respect to chanting, fans in the South Stand engaged in positive passages of play for BAFC, supporters in the South and North Stands appeared to follow the lead of the West Stand when they did involve themselves in chants. There appeared to be a general belief across the different stands of the stadium that the West Stand supporters would lead chants. However, the North and South Stand fans would take part but appeared to limit their involvement to the simpler chants as exemplified in (11).

(11)ALBION ... ALBION ... ALBION ... ALBION

Chants in the South Stand were also not as concentrated as they were in the West Stand (as [Figure 2](#) attempts to represent). However, there was evidence to suggest that those supporters in the South and North stands that were closer to the West Stand would be more vocal when engaging in these collective chanting rituals.

This would suggest that chanting was a linguistic practice evident across the entire fan group. However, the subtle variation in the volume, degree of involvement in and the nature of the chants that fans in these different stands would exhibit, provides a way for stadium attendees to lay claim to different more nuanced fan identities in the course of their supporting rituals. Such variation with respect to chanting might point to greater or lesser affiliation with the club, as chanting and engaging in collective chants is a very public and on-record way to claim to the identity of a fan.

Discussion

In this study we have used the discursive behaviour of football fans in a UK football stadium as data to contribute insights to wider discussions about football culture. In particular, we have used taken-for-granted verbal behaviour of football fans engaged in the act of supporting their team to probe the identities that fans construct for themselves as they watch their team amongst other fans in the stadium.

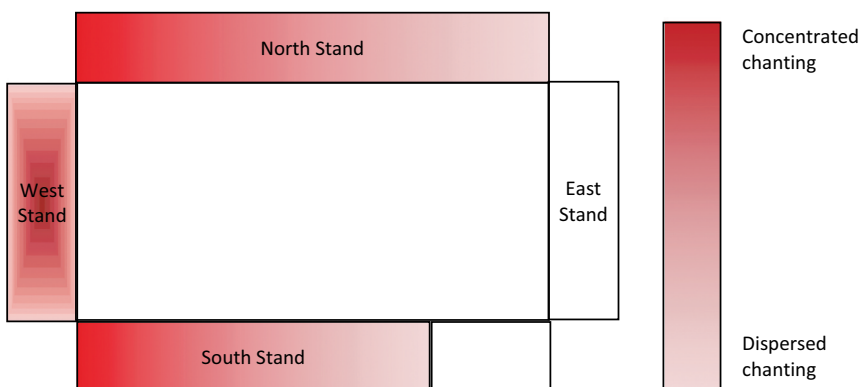


Figure 2. Volume of chants across ground.

Central to these empirical illustrations presented above is a view of identity as a sociocultural phenomenon,³⁸ where individuals perform self in and through their (linguistic) behaviour in line with their knowledge of what is considered to be expected or appropriate in a sociocultural setting. From this perspective, identities are not performed in a vacuum; they are performed by socialized individuals who, in the performance of self, in and through discourse, put on record (shape and/or challenge) their knowledge of the culture they are claiming membership to. The discursive behaviour by fans in a stadium, then, is much more than just noise; it is football fans performing (or attempting to perform) relevant and culturally understood identities in the company of others who are well-placed to judge these performances.

For social scientists, this authentic process of social identity construction offers a rich source of naturally occurring data capable of revealing insights about social groups in our society, particularly the unspoken and abstract cultural knowledge systems that underlie and are reconstructed in behaviour. The empirical work carried out in this study sought to probe this resource in a UK football cultural context in order to provide a deeper understanding of the cultural enactment of football fan identity.

Reframing the notion of football culture

As we have demonstrated, the identity performances in our stadium were enacted in variable ways, with recognizable patterns of difference located across the three stands in the stadium we collected data from. Through our observations and analysis of the three separate home supporter sections of the stadium, we found variable discursive behaviours that reflect and construct different fan identities.

It should be noted that these cultural portraits of fans in the West Stand (the **fanatics**), the North Stand (the **reserved**) and South Stand (the **detractors**) at BAFC should not be read as absolute, concrete templates. Any study attempting to locate coherent behavioural practices, particularly on a linguistic level, amongst hundreds or even thousands of individuals is going to face a challenge when isolating generalizable trends. Outliers in each stand did exist. Although because of the extent and division of variable practices across the stadium, they did run the risk of isolating themselves. There were also claims we did not make in this article here because they did not meet a threshold in the eyes of the researcher to be attributed fairly to fans in that stand.

These issues aside, the variable identity performances noted in our data raise immediate questions about the coherence of the monolithic notion of football culture from which these identities gain coherence, and raise questions about how we might better understand, deploy or define this concept of football culture in theoretical work and practical discussions about football. As outlined at the beginning of this article, football culture is sometimes deployed as a synonym for hooliganism. However, the behaviour we observed in our data did not amount to stereotypical understandings of hooliganism, certainly not of the kind referenced in Baroness Casey's review.³⁹ Not only that but the behaviour of fans in a single stadium showed observable and recognizable discursive behaviour that hinted at various ways fans viewed themselves and performed their identities as supporters and, by extension, a broader and more flexible understanding of the culture of football supporting.

Such questions have already been raised by other scholars, and our findings find favour with arguments that propose a spectrum view of football fan identity. Previous ethnographic research⁴⁰ has also argued that football crowds consist of many different subgroups, contradicting media portrayals of football fans⁴¹ who group them under the label of "hooligans" and other perceptions of sports fans⁴² which unfairly stereotype and limit our understanding of them. In this study, we have attempted to identify how that variation is enacted or performed by shining a light on specific discursive resources fans draw on to construct their identities in the act of supporting their team in the stadium.

In light of the findings presented here, we would propose that the concept of football culture be redefined as an umbrella term capturing the broader “array of identities” being constructed by fans, rather than being deployed to foreground one problematic one. As Goodenough⁴³ argues, culture should not be perceived at a single static phenomenon which derives the actions of its constituents. More accurately, culture envelopes a plethora of values and beliefs that influence a broad range of behaviours and act as a set of options for individuals to exploit. Discourses of football culture do not always appear to index this melange view, and it may be up to researchers to critically debate the unfair monolithic use of this label.

Such a redefinition is not meant to hide hooliganism from view. Rather, it is intended to ground a new direction for sociological research, one that foregrounds a theoretical task of locating the broader potential of football identities that the culture allows – the array of culturally sanctioned and understood identities fans adopt and construct when supporting their team. Engaged in this endeavour, researchers might, of course, seek to locate value systems and the behaviours that cross different football fan identities and subcultures while at the same time foregrounding the more interesting research issue of what makes fans different.

The role of ethnolinguistics and discourse analysis

We would like to close this article by bringing back into focus one of the key purposes of the present thematic issue: highlighting the value of discourse analysis and linguistic tools for analysing social behaviour in footballing contexts. Discourse analysis has gained greater prominence since what has been noted as the linguistic turn in the social sciences.⁴⁴ Discourse analysts have been particularly active plying their trade in areas where there is a significant need for more empirical evidence to support, drive and problematize theoretical arguments about social behaviour.

In this study, we have been able to locate important discursive systems capable of revealing relatively stable identity performances amongst groups of people engaged in the same activity (supporting their team). While there were behaviours that were seen across the stadium (i.e. the wearing of club colours), these were non-verbally enacted. This may highlight the value and importance of paying attention to language and the functions it performs in stadium discourse for better locating the subtle differences in underlying value systems being indexed in discursively constructed identity performances.

We hope this study provides another illustration of the value of sociolinguistic and discourse analytic research to football and sport scholarship.⁴⁵ As others have noted, there is great potential for interdisciplinary work to be conducted within and across disciplines that either deploys a discourse analytical toolkit or is housed in theories of linguistically oriented approaches to discourse analysis.⁴⁶

Conclusion and future research

In this study, through a culture – identity – language conceptual frame, we have attempted to make sense of everyday fan discourse in the stadium at deeper levels of social meaning. From observations of language in action in a UK football stadium, we have presented and pinned down claims as to the variable ways in which fans constructed their identities in the different stands of this stadium. In the process, we have also illustrated some of the discursive systems from which fans may select resources to index these identities – i.e. variation in who they address through their talk, the volume of their talk, the degree of their orientation to group song and chant, the design of directives and assessments.

At a broader cultural level – from which identity performances find coherence – the findings presented in this article not only challenge the stereotypical notion of the football fan as constructing a hooligan identity, but they also point to the potential for distinct subcultures that give rise to or support variable subject positions for fans to adopt as they support their team. From these findings, we have argued that the concept of football culture, as it is used as a paraphrase for

hooliganism or as a monolithic notion capturing universally held values of football fans, is not fit for purpose and will not advance our understanding of this sociocultural group beyond identifying and perhaps unfairly ascribing generalizable similarities.

Limitations and looking forward

This project is a preliminary work, both in terms of the observational and analytical tools we have applied here. As a result, there are several limitations that need highlighting here. Beyond the more obvious and often insurmountable limitations that are applied to qualitative research inquiry (i.e. lack of generalizability), we feel that there are some important considerations future researchers wishing to deploy a similar approach might want to consider.

Firstly, future researchers may also be able to navigate the ethical concerns we raised by integrating themselves with groups of fans that are comfortable with their linguistic behaviour being recorded for closer linguistic analysis. This might allow for greater amounts of linguistic data to be collected and an even finer-grained lens on discursive identity construction. Secondly, a greater integration of the events of the football match with the discursive behaviour might also provide more nuanced insights into the performance of fan identities in the stadium. While we did attempt to account for the ways fans reacted to specific events of an unfolding match, we feel greater systematicity in the observations here would be of value to the more in-depth accounts qualitative researchers seek to offer. Finally, future researchers might also attempt to integrate different sources of information, such as demographic data, to carry out more in-depth analysis of the fan identity spectrum. Research of this kind might then be able to orient towards intersectionality trends currently alive and emerging as prominent in social science research into social identities.

Notes

1. **Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB**, The Baroness Casey Review, *An Independent Review of Events Surrounding the UEFA Euro 2020 Final 'Euro Sunday' at Wembley*.
2. *Inter alia* Armstrong, *Football Hooligans*; Robson, 'No One Likes Us, We Don't Care', Pearson, *An Ethnography of English Football Fans*.
3. Casey, *An independent review of events surrounding the UEFA Euro 2020 Final 'Euro Sunday' at Wembley*.
4. Pearson, *An Ethnography of English Football Fans*.
5. Armstrong, *Football Hooligans*; Robson, "No One Likes Us, We Don't Care"; Pearson, *An Ethnography of English Football Fans*.
6. Armstrong, *Football Hooligans*, 145.
7. Robson, 'No One Likes Us, We Don't Care'.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Madrigal, 'Cognitive and Affective Determinants of Fan Satisfaction with Sporting Event Attendance'.
10. *Ibid.*, 222.
11. Madrigal, 'The Influence of Social Alliances with Sports Teams on Intentions to Purchase Corporate Sponsors' Products', 15.
12. Snyder, Lassegard, and Ford, 'Distancing after Group Success and Failure'.
13. Hirt, Zillman, Erickson, and Kennedy, 'Costs and Benefits of Allegiance'.
14. Snyder, Lassegard, and Ford, 'Distancing after Group Success and Failure'.
15. Giulianotti, 'Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flaneurs'.
16. Space restrictions prevent a thorough review of these different identities. However, see Giulianotti, 'Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flaneurs' for the original analysis and report on these variable identities.
17. Pearson, *An Ethnography of English Football Fans*, 2.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, 62.
20. Bucholtz and Hall, 'Identity and Interaction'; Fairclough, 'Critical and Descriptive Goals in Discourse Analysis'; Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse*; Gee, 'Discourse vs. Discourse'.
21. Bucholtz and Hall, 'Locating Identity in Language'; Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse*.
22. Pennycook, 'Performativity and Language Studies'.
23. For a discussion of this, see Lazzaro-Salazar, 'Social Constructionism'.

24. Bucholtz and Hall, 'Identity and Interaction'; Fairclough, 'Critical and Descriptive Goals in Discourse Analysis'; Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse*; Gee, 'Discourse vs. Discourse'.
25. Caldwell, Walsh, Vine & Jureidini, *The Discourse of Sport*; File, *How Language Shapes Relationships in Professional Sports Teams: Power and Solidarity Dynamics in a New Zealand Rugby Team*.
26. Gibbons, *English National Identity and Football Fan Culture*.
27. Brewer, *Ethnography*.
28. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*.
29. See, for example, Hymes, *Foundations in Sociolinguistics*; Eckert and Wenger, 'Communities of Practice in Sociolinguistics'; Eckert, *Jocks and Burnouts*.
30. Copland et al., *Linguistic Ethnography*, 24.
31. *Ibid.*, 26.
32. Mooney and Evans, *Language, Society and Power*, 128.
33. Copland et al., *Linguistic Ethnography*, 40.
34. Armstrong, *Football Hooligans*, 8–11.
35. Armstrong, *Football Hooligans*.
36. *Ibid.*, 10.
37. Pearson, *An Ethnography of English Football Fans*.
38. Bucholtz and Hall, 'Identity and Interaction'; Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.
39. Casey, *An Independent Review of events surrounding the UEFA Euro 2020 Final 'Euro Sunday' at Wembley*.
40. *Inter alia* Armstrong, *Football Hooligans*; Pearson, *An Ethnography of English Football Fans*; Robson, 'No One Likes Us, We Don't Care'; Winands, *Interaktionen von Fußballfans*.
41. See Boffey, 'Euro 2016'.
42. See Rudd, 'Sport Spectator Behavior as a Moral Issue in College Sport'; Spaaij, 'Men Like Us, Boys Like Them'.
43. Goodenough, 'Toward a working theory of culture', 266–267.
44. Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn*.
45. Caldwell et al., *The Discourse of Sport*; File, *How Language Shapes Relationships in Professional Sports Teams: Power and Solidarity Dynamics in a New Zealand Rugby Team*; Lavric, Pisek, Skinner & Stadler, *The Linguistics of Football*.
46. Caldwell et al., *The Discourse of Sport*.

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