



Language patterns in sports headlines

Ben Farndon analyses the language of the headlines that followed Greece's Euro 2004 win.

The Greek football team's shock victory in July's Euro 2004 tournament meant that Monday 5 July was a dream day for headline writers around the land. We were left with a fascinating cross section of the linguistic patterns that such headlines follow, as well as the differing styles of tabloids and broadsheets.

Patterns of punning

Puns pervade many of the headlines and a similar pattern of phonological and semantic play is in evidence. Let's take 'Football's coming Homer' (the Guardian, referred to in a letter of 5 July) as an initial example. In this case, the headline is constructed around an existing expression of relevance to football: the Euro '96 mantra 'Football's coming home'. However, a near-homophone has been used to replace the last word: 'Homer' is close enough orthographically and phonologically for the reader to make the connection, in a way that 'Grecian' wouldn't be. It's also important that the inserted word is from the semantic field of all things Greek, here a famous Greek poet.

Exactly the same pattern recurs frequently: 'Greece is the word' (the Guardian), 'Acropolis Wow!' (the Mirror), 'Grecian 2004' (the Mirror), 'Acropolis Now' (the Sun) and 'Grecians to be cheerful' (the Sun). Or it could also be done with an individual syllable within a word, as in 'Eugreeka' (the Sun).

These puns make allusions to many areas and it's interesting to note a tabloid-broadsheet difference here. In tabloids like the Sun we find references to films and Greek places ('AcropolisNow'), objects ('Grecian Earners') and hair-dye ('Grecian 2004'). In the broadsheets we come across more references to Greek writings and mythology: 'Homer' (the Guardian), 'Greek tragedy' (the Independent) 'Achilles' Heel' (the Times). The differing demographics of the two newspaper types presumably have some bearing on the references made. We could speculate over where one would be most likely to read headlines like 'Ouzo clever boy then' and 'What a pitta for Portugal', 'A feta compli' and 'Greece Troyumph', given the allusions they make.

A pattern in which homonyms are used to create puns is also apparent. In 'Greece conjure up one final shock' (the FT) 'final' could be taken in two ways: the shock that happened in the Euro 2004 final (noun) or the final shock of the tournament (adjective). Again such linguistic play is frequently used in headlines: consider 'Charlady cleans up \$294 million jackpot' (BBC Ceefax, July 2004).

Grammar

Grammatically, the tabloid and broadsheet headlines differ greatly in complexity. Many of the headlines in the broadsheets use grammatically simple sentences, for example 'Greece is the word' (the Guardian). Yet

the tabloids all use a brief noun phrase, typically comprised of a head noun and one pre-modifier: 'Greek Gods' and 'Grecian Earners' (the Sun) for instance. The space available on the page, as well as the characteristic size of the headlines in each paper, perhaps plays a role in this.

Amongst the broadsheets' headlines, the conventional trend for the simple present tense is seen: 'Charisteads heads ...' (the Telegraph), 'Greece conjure up ...' (the FT), 'Charisteads strikes ...' (the Times) all create a sense of immediacy.

Lexis

Proper nouns of players and countries occur frequently in such headlines. This seems most noticeable in the broadsheet rather than tabloid papers, where there's a focus on the factual details of the match. An example is 'Charisteads heads unfancied Greeks into wonderland' (theTelegraph).

There is a degree of lexical informality in the tabloid headlines: 'Wow!' and 'Eugreeka' demonstrating expressions more typical of the spoken mode. Generous helpings of the exclamation mark also contribute to this impression. Lexical informality is also a feature of the broadsheets' headlines: contraction in 'Football's coming ...', phrasal verb in 'Greece conjure up ...' and clipping in 'Figo and co' (the Independent). We also see much use of cliché: 'break the heart' (the Independent), 'into Wonderland' (the Telegraph) and 'sends a thunderbolt' (Express).

Semantics

These clichés lead us to the consideration of sensationalised and figurative language. Hyperbole is certainly not hard to find, with an array of expressions where meaning is derived from non-literal translation: 'Greece conjure up one final shock' (the FT) and 'Charisteads strikes to break the heart of the host nation' (the Independent). Certainly the references to Greek mythology might be viewed as somewhat grandiose comparisons to make after a football match. It is interesting to note that, when it comes to something as emotionally charged as football, even the supposedly cooler, more analytic papers are not averse to using hyperbole.

And finally ...

I can't resist the temptation to end with a brief speculation into how these headline patterns might have recorded another country's victory: 'Bouncing Czechs!' for a Czech Republic win perhaps, 'Abbacadabra' for Sweden, 'Get an Eiffel of this' for the French, or even 'Svensational!'.

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