

NNS Proficiency and Identity Construction in Sports Media Discourse and Interactions

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If Capello said to me, “Glenn, I’d like to have a chat with you, you have been England manager”, one of the things I would say to him is don’t learn English too well.

Glenn Hoddle
(England manager 1996-1999)

Abstract

This paper addresses the relationship between NNS proficiency and professional and national identity by examining the case of Fabio Capello, whose four-year management of the English national football team established an extended intercultural setting for assessing the impact of the limited L2 skills of a high-profile NNS professional in the public sphere. By referring to the Interlanguage (IL) model, a quantitative and diachronic analysis of Capello’s L2 competence during his tenure is carried out. The analysis is completed by drawing on aspects of identity theory to assess how closely and at what points L2 competence was involved in the mediated construction of his identity as a ‘fitting’ foreign manager of the English squad.

Keywords: L2 competence, interlanguage, professional identity, mediated identity construction.

I. Introduction

While the England manager’s job shares certain affinities with a club manager’s, there are important differences. The most immediately obvious is that the national team embodies a ‘national’ identity. National managers are instrumental in reflecting ‘their’ nation’s status on the international stage. Fabio Capello’s four years in the job afford opportunities for examining the tensions generated by his

NNS status in a post that is inevitably freighted with cultural and national ‘values’.

2. Data

The data is drawn from two sets of corpora. To assess the tensions between NNS linguistic competence and identity it is necessary to establish Capello’s L2 competence during his tenure. This error analysis is carried out on a set of four corpora, totalling 41,975 words, comprised of transcripts of media interactions involving Capello (press conferences and post-match interviews) from 2008 to 2011.

The issue of identity construction and linguistic competence is considered from the perspective of how L2 competence is factored into the discursive construction of the ‘outgroup’ member. This is done through analysis of a second set of corpora, totalling 66,193 words, comprised of articles about Capello in the online versions of major national newspapers across the spectrum of red tops, black tops and broadsheets. The findings from the two sets of corpora are then compared for patterns and discrepancies.

3. Analytical framework

The differences in the kinds of data examined required two intersecting frameworks. The first reflects the need for a ‘fair’ yardstick for assessing the linguistic competence of a NNS. The ‘interlingual hypothesis’ (Selinker 1972) was chosen because it recognises the feasibility of successful communication, even though the NNS may be at quite a low point on the Interlanguage continuum (e.g. see Corder 1992: 29; Cherrington 2004: 308). The second is appropriate to the analysis of ‘inscribed’ texts (van Leeuwen 2004: 7-14) and draws on aspects of identity theory to examine how the media factored L2 language competence into the discursive construction of the foreign England manager’s identity.

3.1. Interlanguage

Capello’s linguistic performance is assessed with reference to the “interlanguage hypothesis”, put forward by Larry Selinker (1972)

“to refer to the linguistic system evidenced when an adult second-language learner attempts to express meanings in the language being learned” (Tarone 2006: 747). No England manager lasts very long, and it is unrealistic to assess a NNS manager’s utterances as if he were likely with time to approximate NS competence. Vivian Cook (2006: 46) refers to this notion as “the monolingual fallacy [...] a monolingual view of bilingualism, as it treats both languages as if they were a first language”.

Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991: 60) refer to the “neutrality of attitude” intrinsic to the term interlanguage, suggesting its aptness as an analytical model. Analysis need not be carried out from a monolingual standpoint, which could interfere with an objective assessment of the way linguistic competence is factored into discursive identity construction of a NNS. Furthermore it helps avoid a prejudicial assessment of the effectiveness of Capello’s IL: divergences from L2 norms are not necessarily seen as errors but features of the IL in which communication nonetheless takes place (e.g. see Corder 1992: 27).

3.2. Sport and national identity

The analysis of the data in corpora set 2 draws on various aspects of identity theory. A general framework is provided by cultural theorists (Billig 1995; Edensor 2002; Porter 2004) who have stressed the role of sport in the construction and maintenance of national identity, particularly through the operation of the ‘sporting fallacy’ (Porter 2004) by which a nation’s sporting achievements, particularly those of the national team, are seen as an index of national political and economic importance.

3.3. Discursive construction of identity

The key theoretical notion underlying the analysis of the press response to Capello’s appointment is that identity is constructed and negotiated through language (Wodak *et al.* 2009; Benwell and Stokoe 2006). The analysis of how NNS linguistic competence features in the construction of national identity draws on Wodak *et al.*’s (2009: 192) definition of common linguistic strategies used to construct the identity of the perceived ‘outgroup’ representative, particularly

through “differentiation”, “derogation” and “dissimilation”. This perspective is complemented by references to narrative identity theory, in particular the theory of “master narratives” (Jones 2004: 172); in other words, narratives that have “the status of normative or dominant storylines” that “offer people a way of identifying what is assumed to be a normative experience” (Andrews 2004: 1).

4. Analysis of corpora set 1: media interactions

The material was selected with a view to positioning Capello’s linguistic performance along the IL continuum. The data was selected from the word list feature of the Ant Conc concordancer, using higher-frequency words (on a scale of 1-1170). An obvious drawback to this kind of error analysis is that it may be excessively prejudicial, tending to focus on what are expected to be likely sources of L2 incompetence. To counter this possible bias, the word list was accessed to select function words, lexis (verbs, adjectives, nouns), and modals for analysis.

4.1. Function words

TABLE 1
Error analysis for function words

	Rank	2008	2009	2010	2011	Total
that	8	-	-	-	10	10
lot	43	-	3	-	-	3
some	52	1	4	-	2	7
like	62	-	2	-	-	2
Total		1	9	-	12	

‘That’ was handled consistently correctly until 2011, when it was used either in place of ‘as’ or ‘than’ in comparative structures. ‘Lot’ indicated a clear ability to use it as a determiner, and as part of an adverbial phrase, the errors occurring in 2009 all being cases

of agreement with the noun. In the same year, the same kind of quantifier-noun agreement error was linked with 'some'. 'Like' was very close to L2 norms, the only two exceptions being when it was used in place of 'as' in the 2009 corpus, an instance of transfer (cf. Gass and Selinker 1992), because the corresponding word '*come*' in Italian is used both in comparisons and in adverbs of manner. The overall pattern of errors that emerges is a 'twin peaks' one.

4.1.1. Lexis

TABLE 2
Patterns of error frequency for lexis

Lexical item	Ranking	2008	2009	2010	2012	frequency	%
difficult	109	1	2	4	3	22	36.36
young	81	3	-	11	-	21	28.80
performance	106	1	1	1	1	14	28.57
problem	112	1	4	2	3	13	74.92
play	15	2	4	6	11	15	18.54
decide	120	-	1	2	1	12	23.33
choose	188	2	3	2	-	10	70
Total		9	15	19	19		

Recurrent problems involved in adjective use were omissions of the subject pronoun before the copular verb, inappropriate use of determiners, and difficulties using them in impersonal constructions following the anticipatory 'it'. Nouns involved difficulties in singular/plural agreement and use of determiners. Verbs entailed mainly third person agreement errors and use of inappropriate tense (notably the absence of the present perfect) or colligation; the sample irregular verb 'choose' involved mistakes in the past forms. The errors increase steadily and then stabilize, particularly through 2009 and up to mid-2010, the period generally regarded as his most successful.

4.1.2. Modals

TABLE 3
Error analysis of modal and semi-modals

	Ranking	2008	2009	2010	2011	total
will	11	4	6	11	19	40
have to	26	1	1	3	-	5
need	42	-	-	1	3	4
can	82	-	2	-	2	4
Total		5	9	15	24	

The most common error, that of subject pronoun omission, is present right across the sample and is a clear case of transfer because, like some other VSO languages, Italian mutes the subject pronoun before verbs. The omission of the preparatory ‘it’ was also frequent when using ‘will’; attempts to use the first conditional also involved a significant proportion of errors in the use of ‘will’. Negatives and word order errors were recurrent (e.g. see Tarone 2006: 751-2).

In IL terms, in all three samples consistently evidence “backsliding”, an aspect of “fossilization” (Selinker 1972) in which, although IL users “are capable of producing the correct L2 form, the IL form is their own norm, which they will resort to, especially when under pressure to produce L2 language or when the desire to communicate is strong” (Cherrington 2004: 308).

Ellis (1985) indicates that also target-like forms can fossilise. This appears to be the case with Capello’s use of modals and semi modals, particularly ‘has to’, which he overuses, albeit effectively, while avoiding the more epistemic range of modality altogether. In IL terms this could be defined as ‘overgeneralisation’ (e.g. see Tarone 2006: 748).

5. Analysis of Corpora set 2: online print discourse

In this section corpora set 2 is analysed to trace patterns in the way L2 competence was factored into the discursive construction of Capello’s identity in the national press between the end of 2007

(when news of his appointment broke) and the beginning of 2012 (when he resigned).

As 'English' was likely to generate numerous instances with other meanings, it was decided to base searches on the most likely collocates (shown in Tables 4 and 5) for 'English' as a language:

TABLE 4
Frequency of verbs collocating with 'language'

Collocates	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
learn	10	2	-	-	1	2
learned	1	-	-	-	-	-
learning	4	1	-	-	4	-
speak	17	3	-	4	19	2
spoke	3	1	-	-	1	-
speaking	3	1	-	-	1	-
master	2	-	-	-	1	2
communicate	1	2	-	-	6	2
communicated	-	-	-	-	-	-
communicating	1	1	-	-	1	-
Total	40	11	0	4	33	8
% of corpus	0.22	0.12	-	0.002	0.40	0.12

TABLE 5
Frequency of further collocates for 'language'

Collocates	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
command	-	-	-	-	7	-
language	14	4	-	4	14	10
lesson	2	-	-	1	3	1
Word(s)	2	3	-	-	-	5
grasp	1	-	-	1	-	1
vocabulary	1	-	-	1	7	1
Capello's	-	2	-	2	3	-
Italian's	1	-	-	-	-	-
his	2	3	-	5	7	1
in	4	-	-	-	2	2
Total	27	12	0	14	43	21
% of corpus	0.27	0.12	0	0.08	0.40	0.12

There are significant consistencies in both tables. References to linguistic competence are comparatively high at the time of his appointment, dip significantly in 2009, and rise steadily to peak in 2011. If such frequencies are calculated in terms of percentages the pattern follows quite closely that of the frequency totals.

5.1. The L2 issue and discursive identity construction

The high frequency of references to linguistic ability is consistent with the initially high ratio of derogatory coverage in the press as part of a process of “dissimilation” (Wodak *et al.* 2009: 33) in the initial period. Heaney (forthcoming) traces a change in the online print media coverage of Capello between 2008 and the end of 2009, which corresponded to the introduction of a new managerial ethos seen by the press as likely to secure qualification for the 2010 World Cup. Broadly speaking, the reaction to Capello in this period is positive, as his management style is seen as introducing discipline to the hitherto lax environment of the England squad. The same study indicates that this phase corresponded to a process of “assimilation” (Wodak *et al.* 2009: 33).

In view of these findings, a search was run for antonyms of ‘language’, of which ‘silence’ generated significant results. References were confined to the corpus for 2008, and all eight occurrences referred to Capello. Further, ‘silence’, a quality seen as a limitation in the corpus for the end of 2007 (and in the data for June 2010 on), here collocates with ‘masterly’ (twice), ‘stony’, ‘reproachful’, ‘cryptic’ and ‘fecund’, all indicative of authority despite low fluency. When limited English language skills are factored into the discursive construction of identity, they appear to confirm the dominant narrative of authority and discipline.

The lower frequency of references to language skills is proportional to Capello’s positive run of results over this period, dropping to zero in 2009, the year of his greatest promise and popularity. However, the rate increases the moment Capello is seen to have failed, namely mid-way through 2010, after elimination from the World Cup.

Taking a cue from a reference in the 2010 corpus to Capello’s apology for England’s performance in South Africa, a search for ‘apologised’ showed two occurrences, as did ‘apology’, while

‘sorry’ occurred four times. These findings suggest that 2010 is a transitional year between two master narratives: the silent but strong authoritarian and the fallible football manager. The renewed increase in references to linguistic deficiencies corresponds to this turning point.

6. Concluding observations

The quantitative and diachronic analysis indicates that Capello’s media interactions were carried out largely in his own IL, with its own recurring grammatical patterns, and that fossilization rapidly set in, with repeated backsliding and negative transfer (Odilin 1989). There is also evidence of a tentative experimentation with more ambitious forms, and fossilisation of correct forms, particularly in the use of epistemic modality, also marked by overgeneralisation.

If the discursive construction of Capello’s identity in the first two years of his tenure follows a progression from derogation and dissimulation to naturalisation and assimilation (Wodak *et al.* 2009), analysis of his entire tenure indicates a reversal in that process, with his fossilising IL increasingly becoming an index of national difference and professional limitations.

The analysis throws into sharp relief the contrast between Capello’s actual linguistic ability and patterns of references to language ability in the online sports media. The fall in derogatory references in the press to L2 competence actually coincides with an increase in departures from L2 norms. When the NNS manager of the national football team is successful, language limitations or approximations are either minimised or reworked into a positive cultural storyline (Jones 2004); but when he fails to maintain the illusion of the ‘sporting fallacy’ (Porter 2004), he is more likely to fall victim to the ‘monolingual fallacy’ (Cook 2006) in the discursive (de)construction of his identity.

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