MULTILINGUALISM IN FOOTBALL TEAMS: METHODOLOGY OF FIELDWORK

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Abstract: *The present article reports on a recent research project on multilingualism in international football teams. It outlines the aims and goals of the project and details the methodology for obtaining relevant data. The main focus is on one specific method of fieldwork – the questionnaire – and the way it has been used in the current project. The questionnaire is compared to the other method through which data have been obtained during the research, namely the interview. A discussion of the questions is followed by an analysis of the nature of some of the multilingual situations in which players need to use foreign languages, detailing the players' own perceptions and actual linguistic performance.*

Key words: *multilingualism, language and football, questionnaire.*

1. Introduction to multilingual research

The present study focuses on several methodological issues connected with the use of questionnaires and interviews as the primary methods of data collection, as implemented in sociolinguistic fieldwork during a recent international research project on multilingualism in football teams. Rather than provide an exhaustive analysis of the research findings, the aim of the article is to outline the goals of the project, situate the practice of multilingual communication as a specific kind of workplace environment, and, crucially, share the researchers' experience with the fieldwork methods applied in this particular project. This concerns mainly the issue of formulating relevant questions and a retrospective consideration of the suitability of selected questions for research of multilingualism in football teams. Drawing on actual research data, the article discusses why respondents may find it easier to answer some questions than others and why metalinguistic reflection on the players' own linguistic production in a foreign language may occasionally turn out to be problematic.

Over the past few decades, modern society has seen the increasing development of numerous situations in which individuals from various language backgrounds are brought together for prolonged periods of time. As a result, such individuals are forced to communicate across language and cultural barriers, nowadays usually using English as a *lingua franca* alongside several other languages. Such multilingual groups are most typically connected with one's workplace.

Multilingual and cross-cultural communication occurs, for instance, in multinational companies, where it has become the rule rather than an exception (Lavric 2008, Bäck and Lavric 2009). As a result of the wider social phenomenon of globalization, people find themselves in working teams requiring them to use other languages than their own or to engage in goal-oriented activities with non-native speakers of their own language. Importantly, the need to deal with linguistic otherness occurs regardless of one's physical location; one may operate within a multilingual working environment even without leaving one's country.

Such work-based groupings of people typically arise as a result of some external imposition, i.e., regardless of the group members' independent will. In this sense, many multilingual groups significantly differ from the many social groupings in

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which individuals may be involved on a more informal basis, e.g., as a result of their hobbies, as well as due to their social, cultural and educational background. In other words, while people can choose their friends, they usually do not have that degree of freedom when choosing their colleagues.

A similar situation occurs, for instance, in refugee camps and asylum seeker centres, where people of various nationalities are brought together and need to communicate not only with one another but also with the relevant authorities and officials from the country in which they find themselves. While refugee/asylum seeker camps represent a relatively temporary situation (although it may take several months or even years for administrative proceedings to come to an end), such multilingual fields are of a more permanent nature in the case of immigrants settling in multinational neighbourhoods, e.g., in the suburbs of major metropolises such as London and Paris (cf. Salverda 2002, Deprez 1994). Such more permanent situations are then typically reflected at state schools, which come to face the challenge of educating highly mixed groups of children from various linguistic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds (Liogier 2009). This also needs to be taken into account in policy-making: the preparation of teachers, public authorities, etc.

2. Sports teams as formal multilingual working environments

A specific type of such formal – or forced – multilingual environments occurs in the case of various sports teams. These have recently come to rely increasingly on players of other nationalities. The influx of foreign players into national leagues, for instance, has been such that most national sports organizations now impose a quota on the number of foreign players who can play in teams. The composition of the team then arises not only as a result of the players' suitability (and financial availability) but also because of nationality politics, with players even occasionally changing citizenship in order to comply with the external regulations.[1]

Professional sports teams can be approached as specific instances of multilingual working environments. This is because such multilingual and multinational groups are formed in a similar manner: particular individuals are brought together on the basis of their skills and availability rather than their own social preferences. In this sense, sports teams constitute formal groups and differ from informal social groupings, in which, as mentioned above, an individual typically chooses his or her membership as the result of their relatively free decision. Sports teams resemble working teams in that all players need to coordinate their activities in order to achieve a common goal.

3. Research of multilingualism in football teams – current project

Surprisingly enough, there has not been much linguistic research into the nature of multilingual communication in sports teams in general and in football teams in

[1] In order to be able to satisfy formal quotas, players thus may, literally speaking, manipulate their identity. However, despite obtaining a new citizenship, they – in many cases – remain linguistic outsiders in their new countries due to their non-native origin. In extreme cases, they may even take years before learning the language of the new country on a sufficiently proficient level, so the multilingual nature of the groups in which they are involved is retained.

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particular.[1] Partly in order to address this omission, a research group was established at the University of Innsbruck in 2007 under the name of 'The Innsbruck Football Research Group'. The group members, led by professor Eva Lavric, set out to systematically describe the situation in multilingual teams in Austria. In 2008, with the expansion of the group by two Czech linguists (authors of this article), the focus of the group broadened to an international analysis of multilingual communication in Czech football teams and the situation of Czech and francophone players in Austrian teams. The Group's initial findings have been intensively communicated to the public, e.g., on the occasion of the European Football Championship held in Austria and Switzerland in 2008.

The current research project aims to find out about the following aspects of multilingualism in football teams: (1) the nature of communication in multilingual teams; (2) strategies and structures used by clubs to make communication successful; and (3) ways of improving such strategies in order to enable more effective communication and the easier integration of new players. The aim has also been to find out about successful strategies and techniques used in teams that could function as communicative models.

The ways of obtaining data have included the following sociolinguistic methods: participant observation and interviews. Participant observation has been used during training sessions in order to identify how information is communicated by the coach to the players. Since non-verbal communication was found to play an important role, it has been agreed with several team managers that the training sessions will be video-recorded in order to allow for a more complex analysis noting the interplay between the verbal and the non-verbal channels.

Data have also been obtained through personal interviews with individual football players, managers and coaches. In the case of players, the interviews have been based on a questionnaire intended to cover various areas of communication. The interviews have also been meant to identify situations of miscommunication because the research project has been based, among others, on the premise that the successful linguistic integration of foreign players in a team may, to a significant degree, contribute to the successful achievement of a team's coordinated activities on the pitch. By extension, the multilingual composition of a team has been believed to result in potential miscommunication (possibly foiling the goal of purposeful coordinated team activity on the pitch).

The combination of these methodological approaches allows researchers to perceive the phenomenon of multilingual communication from two sides. On the one hand, there is the observation, description and analysis of actual communication occurring in its natural context (albeit during training sessions) (Labov 1972). On the other, this is supplemented by introspection on the part of the players reflecting on their communicative skills and ways of communicating / miscommunicating within the team (Blanchet and Gotman 2005). In addition to these two methods, selective analyses of available media interviews (from journals, radio broadcasts, fans' websites) with various players and coaches have been carried out in order to understand the issue of multilingual communication in more detail.

[1] Since the aim of the present article is to deal with selected methodological aspects of ongoing research, the discussion of the few previous studies is intentionally left out. They are sufficiently summarized in, e.g., Giera et al. (2008).

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4. Questionnaire for interviews

As mentioned above, the research data have been partly obtained with the help of interviews. For the purpose of the study, a special questionnaire was designed in order to assist in collecting the relevant information.

The questionnaire, provided in *Appendix 1* for ease of reference, was drafted as a written document. Nevertheless, since it was assumed that data collection in the written form might be dispreferred for the players, the questionnaire was rather intended as a guide for interviewers conducting face-to-face interviews with individual players, although it has been implemented on several occasions in the written form. The aim has been to establish – as much as possible – an informal conversation with the players that is topic-governed rather than question-driven (as is the case with the traditional methods of the sociolinguistic interview by William Labov, cf. the description of this method in SCHILLING-ESTES, 2007: 171).

The questionnaire has been designed in a way that reflects the aims of the research. For this purpose, it starts by establishing the linguistic background of given players. Originally, this part of the questionnaire was meant to be collected from the players in written form before their interviews but it became apparent that this was organizationally difficult and impractical.

There appear to be several reasons favouring the full interview as the main method of data collection. The main advantage of the interview consists in its temporal limitation: players who are interviewed know the approximate length of the interview to which they agree in advance by their willingness to get involved in the project. This is obviously much more effective than relying on the players to give written replies to a questionnaire in private and then submit the replies to the researchers.

With some high-profile players, the researchers may be quite privileged to secure a limited time for the interview – of whatever length – since some players tend to be tired of journalists and constant media attention. Their willingness to answer questions at least in the form of a brief interview thus has to be appreciated. Asking them to do more in their free time may be a strategy doomed to failure.

Another reason for the preference of the interview is the limited availability of players. Those players who agree (often through their managers) to take part in the research are sometimes hard to contact independently. Moreover, they tend to limit their availability to the researchers to one occasion only, leading to the researchers' preference to utilize the spoken interview in order to maximize the amount of relevant information obtained from the players within a limited period of time. Generally, players are more willing to speak than to write. Under suitable conditions, however, the interviews will continue longer than originally agreed – until all issues are sufficiently covered and as long as the respondents feel at ease. Often, they are genuinely interested and become very involved in the discussion.

In any case, what precedes the actual data extraction from the respondents is a preliminary phase, when suitable information is obtained about the players in advance. The information typically comes from the media – previous interviews, club web pages, personal histories of players, online fan groups, etc. In this way, the pool of general questions in the questionnaire can be tailored more precisely to a particular interviewee, with some questions weeded out as irrelevant and others added in order to reflect the specific situation and experience of the player. Very often, a surprising amount of information is publicly available on first-league players; by contrast, almost nothing

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may be obtained in advance on players from lower leagues, since these tend to escape media attention and may not have a dedicated following of fans.[1]

The actual interview can then rely on a given player's profile (obtained from various sources prior to the interview) and open by establishing his 'language biography'. The researcher can then launch the interview with several questions that function either as real questions asked in order to fill gaps in the player's profile or as requests for the confirmation of previously known information. These initial questions not only provide a suitable opening for the interview but they also help to create a friendly atmosphere, put the interviewee at ease and provide a background to refer to in the actual interview that follows.

5. Some methodological issues and problems

From the very beginning, the questionnaire has been meant to provide guidance to the interviewee rather than some kind of a pre-determined structure that needs to be slavishly followed – if only because each interview is unique and respects the topics gradually developing in a mutual conversation. Some questions have turned out to be crucial, others have been found to be marginal or less relevant since what they reflect is the researchers' external perspective on multilingual communication in teams rather than the actual reality. This may be expected, given the researchers' role of outsider to the groups studied.

The interviews are conducted either in a player's mother tongue or in the language which he claims to know best. In either case, there are several possible problems. It has appeared that even when the players communicate in their mother tongue, some questions may be problematic due to the technical nature of the terminology. This was the case with questions Nos. 5 and 6 in their original wordings ('*What is the role of lingua franca – is it English?*' and '*What is the role of non-verbal means of communication – within the team and on the pitch with other players and referees?*'). The problematic terms which were not understood by some football players were 'lingua franca' and 'non-verbal communication', prompting the need for these questions to be reformulated in order to get over the players' embarrassment. Needless to say, football players themselves may occasionally experience a similar reaction – this time from the researchers – when describing certain technical issues and specialized vocabulary connected with their profession.[2]

One of the related findings (of a general methodological nature) is the confirmation that when asked spontaneously and on the spot, research subjects may not be able to easily reflect metalinguistically on their own behaviour. The replies to this question might be different if the subjects had more time to think about the answer, i.e., when replying to a written questionnaire.

What should be made of these failures to understand each other? On the one hand, the finding gives further evidence of the limited applicability of the written questionnaire as an independent tool for obtaining information; on the other, it serves as

[1] This was the case, for instance, with the Czech player Lukáš Rygl, playing in the 4th league in Austria. A significant part of the interview consisted in ascertaining his personal data, which were not available from public sources.

[2] In addition, question No. 7 has a metalinguistic focus since it deals specifically with slang words in the team, i.e., players need to explain the meaning of the lexis to the interviewers: '*Do you use any special code or slang words in the team? Or any loan words from some other language?*'

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an illustration of the need of the interviewer to be able to instantly modify and rephrase some questions so that successful communication can be sustained even in the case of one's mother tongue. It might seem as something of a paradox that research aimed at identifying successes and failures of communication in multilingual environments will lead to the finding that communication in one's native language may likewise be unsuccessful – in fact blocked – just because the researchers may wrongly assume the level of of general knowledge of some concepts on the part of the interviewees.

Regardless of technical terminology, which may be anticipated to constitute an obstacle to full understanding even in one's native language, the interviews had to deal with another code-related hindrance. Interviews conducted in a player's second (i.e., non-native) language can be successful only as long as the relevant player's competence in the language is sufficient for this purpose. It appears that individuals may manifest degrees of competence: although their general communicative skills may be good, mainly in relation to the game, they may lack the ability to efficiently communicate in other situations which are novel or removed from their everyday experience. This is further compounded by the fact that the discussions often deal with theoretical issues rather than the practical day-to-day transactional communication or interpersonal communication used for conveying emotion or expressing one's sense of belonging to a group.

Some questions in the questionnaire have been found to reflect the preoccupation of researchers with language, who may tend to ascribe more importance to a given phenomenon than it actually deserves. This appears to be the case with question No. 10 ('*How does communication with the referees function in international games? What is the role of the team captain? Does he have special language needs? On the pitch and off the pitch?*'). Some interviewees expressed mild puzzlement as to why a captain should have some special language skills, claiming that the role of the captain is oriented towards the team rather than externally. A good captain thus must have a leading role in the team and is chosen for his abilities in the field. By contrast, communication with referees is minimal and players are taught that it is useless, anyway. A referee is the ultimate arbiter of the game and discussions with him may cause more harm than bring benefit. Paradoxically, some players have claimed that the less you have linguistically in common with the referee, the better: in some situations, the linguistic barrier may enable the players to vent their emotion through expletives, which might not be acceptable in the absence of any such barrier.

A similar contrast between the analysts' hope of discovering potentially useful data from the informants and the uneventful reality occurred in the case of question No. 20 ('*Do language aspects play a role when signing a new player? A coach? Does the career history of a player/coach, especially his acquired language competences, play a role?*'). Despite the researchers' attempts at getting the interviewees to elaborate on the polar form of the question, the answer provided was a simple 'no'. Language competences of a player do not seem to play a role: a player is chosen according to his abilities to fit into a certain position in the team. Although language may not have a crucial role in the selection of players (at least in the opinion of the players themselves), the linguistic environment may, to a certain degree, eventually pre-determine whether a player will remain with a team for a prolonged period of time or try to leave the team soon by transferring to a linguistically (or culturally[1]) more favourable environment.

[1] This was confirmed, for instance, by the Czech football player Tomáš Jun when describing his experience in a Turkish team.

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While it was stated at the beginning that multilingual communication in football teams may be classified as an instance of a multilingual working environment, it must be noted that the activity that players engage in consists of physical action that is linguistically coordinated only very minimally. While language does play a role in the rehearsing of tactics during training sessions and in pre-match instructions, the actual game relies as much as possible on automated/habitualized physical behaviour, with language having a rather marginal function (e.g., to warn a fellow player of an opponent approaching from behind, to signal one's availability for a pass, etc.).

As regards the second part of question No. 20, language abilities do not play, according to players, any role in the case of the selection of suitable coaches, either. There are several ways of compensating for language deficiencies: the use of an interpreter, the use of a linguistically more competent assistant to the coach, and physical demonstration during training sessions. Knowing the rules of the game, players are used to receiving information in a non-verbal manner and are commonly instructed by means of graphs and strategic illustrations on flip charts and boards.

Finally, the replies to questions Nos. 24 and 25 have likewise led to interesting conclusions ('*Please give examples of miscommunication – your own experience, other teams or colleagues*', and *'Have you ever encountered or heard about problems in a team due to linguistic or national antagonisms? Or due to the formation of subgroups – players coming from the same country or language group?*'). In the case of these questions, the players interviewed uniformly answered in the negative, not admitting to any problems or situations of miscommunication.

However, there seems to be more behind this finding than the general 'no-problem' attitude of football players that they may like to manifest publicly. First, multilingual communication may actually present less of a problem in the working environments of football teams than an outsider might think. This is because so much of the communication during training sessions and pre-match briefings is context-dependent and related to the players' positions and tactics which they know in advance. Players are in fact often able to predict the content of the communication just from the given situation and body gestures. A part of the 'no-problem' attitude is also connected with the generally informal atmosphere in football clubs, where players will willingly help each other linguistically because their individualism needs to be harnessed for the benefit of the team. As one of the players put it during an interview, a linguistically more experienced player will quite happily interpret for his less proficient colleague because he wants to make sure that the other player will know perfectly well what to do on the pitch – any insufficient understanding of instructions might backfire even against those who do not have any problems with understanding.[1]

Second, although a football player may claim full competence in a language, it may appear from the ensuing conversation that he will need assistance beyond the immediate context of his working environment. This occurs, for instance, when making a more demanding purchase, taking a family member to a doctor or dealing with official institutions such as banks and other authorities. There are indications that 'full competence' for players often means the ability to converse with other players and making themselves understood in general conversational situations. Where more precise linguistic skills are needed, the role is taken over by the players' agents or team managers who will often arrange the necessary matters in their own language. Some

[1] This was pointed out by the Czech player Tomáš Jun and confirmed by his colleague Petr Voříšek, both playing for the Austrian team FC Altach in the 2009 spring season.

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players have also noted the practice of explaining to a local player or a team manager what needs to be arranged and then calling them from the relevant institution (e.g. a bank). The matter is then mediated by phone by the team manager, who communicates with the official from the institution on behalf of the player.

At the same time, however, one can perhaps identify a phenomenon resembling Labov's "Observer's Paradox" (1970): when asked about their linguistic behaviour, respondents may give what they think are the expected answers or downplay problems of multilingual communication in order to present themselves – though not necessarily consciously – in a more positive light. This is typically the case in media interviews; in a more linguistically-focused interview, however, players are willing to confide in the researcher that not all is linguistically as ideal as it may be presented to the wider public.

6. Conclusion

As indicated above, the conclusions to be drawn from the current phase of the research project on multilingualism in football teams may be formulated in two broad areas. On the one hand, the research has led to a reflection on the methodology used and indicates what may be realistically expected from the respondents. On the other, it points out some significant aspects of multilingual communication in formal groups, i.e., those in which people find themselves as a result of external forces rather than their own free choice. These groups are, most characteristically, constituted by professional working environments.

Methodologically, the findings indicate that a crucial role is played by the interview, while the questionnaire may be rather dispreferred by the respondents – football players. Generally speaking, the qualitative findings are easier to obtain through the interview, though the nature of the data – obtained in casual conversations with the players – makes them more difficult to quantify and compare. As regards the choice of questions, it appears that inappropriate questions may result in communication barriers (both in a questionnaire and an interview).

As far as the nature of multilingual communication is concerned, the research shows that the issue of what constitutes 'a sufficient knowledge of a language', i.e., the level of one's linguistic proficiency in a foreign language, is notoriously difficult to pin down subjectively. While players will typically not admit to any linguistic problems in their interviews with the media (which serve as the preliminary material for establishing some of the players' linguistic backgrounds) and they will not immediately acknowledge any problems or cases of miscommunication when directly asked about this issue, subsequent detailed conversations with them indicate that many players do indeed have serious linguistic problems in a foreign team. Meeting the requirements to work in a multilingual environment is then actually harder than many of them are willing to admit.

There is something of a paradox: the players' understanding in formal contexts (i.e., when communication is part of their 'working environment', which in their case is playing football) is enhanced by their knowledge of the rules, non-verbal communication as well as the non-linguistic situation. Such formal contexts of the game rely on a limited number of situations or game-related events and draw on a limited vocabulary.

By contrast, informal contexts in these multilingual groups involve situations which are essentially open-ended and the linguistically less experienced players may

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experience severe problems not only with communicating but often merely with understanding. These situations involve group gatherings of players outside of the context of the game (e.g., in restaurants and during other social events). As players themselves have pointed out, complete understanding is not necessary; what matters is a player's presence and attempt to become a part of the group by engaging in shared free-time activities. The friendly nature of such groups then in turn leads to a tolerance of linguistically deficient involvement on the part of some players.

At the same time, however, there are situations in which a player needs to communicate in a foreign language outside of the scope of the formal group of the multilingual working environment in a football team or outside of the informal group of players engaging in free-time activities. This kind of communication, often involving personal matters and issues connected with other family members, is the most difficult for the players – partly because they cannot expect to receive the same degree of linguistic tolerance from the public as from people in their own teams and partly because linguistic precision is required from them in situations which they are not accustomed to. Although players may initially state that they do know a language well and do not have problems with communication, they may rely on interpreters or team managers to take care of communication in these contexts.

Acknowledgements
We would like to thank our colleague prof. Eva Lavric from the University of Innsbruck for her inspiration and active involvement in this international project, as well as all the other members of her research group. Our thanks also go to the AKTION agency, which kindly sponsored the initial part of this cooperation (project No. 50p1: *Strategies of Communication in Multi-Lingual Football Teams. A Research Project of Language Integration of Slavonic and Francophone Players and Coaches in Austria and the Czech Republic*) and the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic, whose additional funding made it possible to partly carry out some research connected with this topic (projects Nos. *GAČR 405/07/0652 Languages in Integration, Integration in Languages* and *GAČR 405/09/P307 Expressivity and youth slang: In search of individual and group identities.*

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Appendix 1 Questionnaire and interview questions – multilingualism in football teams[1]

Part 1 – Written questionnaire
Name of player:
Football club:
Age:
Nationality:

Career history, especially foreign experience:

Language biography:
Mother tongue(s):
Foreign language(s):
Which language? Learnt how? How long? Practised how long under which circumstances? Language proficiency? Do you pick up or learn languages easily?

Linguistically significant professional situations (problems and coping strategies)

Whom else do you know who could be an interesting interview partner for us regarding languages in football teams?

Part 2 – Oral interview

7. Please describe the language situation in you present club.
8. In which ways is/was it similar or different in any previous club?
9. Which languages do/did you have to use or which language(s) are/were you confronted with?
10. Which language(s) are/were spoken in the team? In which languages does/did the team operate? Officially, unofficially?
11. Role of a *lingua franca*? (English? the language of the club's own country?)
12. Role of non-verbal means of communication? Within the team and on the pitch with other players or referees?
13. Do you use any special code or slang words in the team? Or loan words from some other language?
14. Please comment on the communication among players, and between players and the coach, in different kinds of situations (practice, pre-match briefing, the match itself, post-match debriefing, changing room…)
15. Having a coach who does not speak the national language is quite a common situation. Do they then work with interpreters? To what extent can this be a drawback?
16. How does communication with the referees function in international games? What is the role of the team captain? Does he have special language needs? On the pitch and off the pitch?
17. Please comment on the communication with the media from the language point of view.
18. Please describe other professional situations where language and

[1] The questionnaire was formulated together with Prof. Eva Lavric of University of Innsbruck, Austria.

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communication play an important role.

19. Please describe everyday life situations in the foreign country/countries, difficulties and ways of coping with them.
20. The cultural aspect: can there be something like a culture shock? Is the club aware of this and do they triy to help?
21. How long does it take players to become acculturated? Are there players who integrate more easily, or cultures that are very different?
22. Are there problems with players' families (who also have to integrate into a new culture)? Does the club help them?
23. Club policy: how are/were foreign players in general integrated into the team? Into the new environment?
24. Please talk about the both language aspect and the cultural aspect.
25. Language aspect: Is there an official club policy? Language courses? Interpreters? Fellow players with the same mother tongue (do they translate, do they help newcomers to integrate)?
26. Do language aspects play a role when signing a new player? A coach? Does the career history of a player/coach, specially his acquired language competences, play a role?
27. If there are interpreters, who chooses them? How are they selected? How do they work?
28. If there are language courses: How are they organized? Who takes them? Are they compulsory? To what extent are they taken seriously?
29. What are/were your personal experiences?
30. Please give examples of miscommunication (own experience, other teams or colleagues).
31. Have you ever encountered or heard about problems in a team due to linguistic or national antagonisms? Or due to the formation of subgroups (players coming from the same country or language group)?
32. Do you know examples of very good practice in your team or in other teams (own experiences or colleagues of yours)?

Question for referees / coaches:

33. Is there a language aspect in the training of coaches / of referees? Would such a focus be necessary?

Last question (for everybody):

28. Whom else do you know who could be an interesting interview partner for us regarding languages in football teams? Please supply name(s) and contact details. Could you please act as our go-between with such persons?

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