English 3100: Section 01

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The Discourse Community within Basketball

Person D said, “Sports are our life…” I captured the aspects of these four simple words without mentally embracing or processing the whole entire sentence. *What makes an individual articulate these words*, I thought to myself as I slowly read my field notes again and again. This time, I read it with a more serious and optimistic tone. “SPORTS…..ARE OUR………LIFE!” I got it, but for some reason I fumbled and questioned myself about the nature of these words. Why are sports their life? Idk, I thought in text message slang! I clearly don’t know! Except for the word clearly, which is my own extra word I embedded into the text message slang. Sports, particularly basketball, are clearly important within specific discourse communities. They become, as Person D pointed out, something bigger and more significant.

Most individuals think sports are a hobby that helps keep people in shape, while others might say the main purpose of sports is to bring up the harmonious character in athletes. I never recalled or justified the real meaning of sports or if it’s an essential profession. In order to clearly understand the occupation of sports, corresponding to the main focus/sport for this paper (Basketball), I spent two and a half hours with a group of teenage boys playing basketball. The boys all had something in common and something that differentiated them from each other. One of the boys has a tattoo on their left arm with the quote, “Ball is Life!” The tattoo illustrated a circular model with a basketball on one side separated with a football on the other. This same boy, Person D, is the same participant that blurted out the words, “Sports are our life and it keeps us busy instead of getting into the streets!” Of course, I mainly focused on the first four simple words before I processed the rest of the sentence because these four words caught my attention. These four simple words were meaningful to me, and it felt as if they were expressed with ambition. In the particular discourse community of these teenage boys, basketball acts as a way to distance them from a dangerous alternative life of drugs, drinking, and other troubles.

 This essay will explore how language operates in a small group of African American teenage boys playing basketball. By doing this, issues of power and determination to succeed in a social system will be emphasized more directly because the social system often keeps these young men down. To explore these issues, this analysis will look at reoccurring themes in the language used by the ball players these include; specialized verbal and nonverbal language use specific to the group, intertextuality, and the frequency in which participants speak.

A Description of the Setting and Participants

 This observation and analysis follows five basketball players: Person A, B, C, D, and E. The five met in a backyard basketball court, located in my backyard, known as “The Imaginary Basketball Court.” The court itself exists in a very empty and narrow alley situated behind a series of houses. As I approached the pavement, I noticed how the concrete on the ground is cracked in numerous areas, there are lots of trash and oil leaks on the ground, and it is visited occasionally by wild animals. The weather was hot and humid on the day of the observation. Person A, who lives by the court, approached the court and looked around. Then he sent out a text message to inform everyone he wants to “hoop” today. The word “hoop,” also used as “hooping,” is a term used to justify the meaning of what a person is trying to say instead of simply saying “Let’s go play basketball today!” It gives slang to the word basketball. The group of teenage boys preceded closer to their destination, “The Imaginary Basketball Court.” All the boys immediately took off their shirts and extra garments until they were down to nothing but their shorts and basketball shoes. I assumed that this form of action was a normal routine that they did and it was performed to inform other members that it was time to play basketball.

 Furthermore, I noticed how some of the members brought book bags, an extra basketball, another pair of basketball shoes, a family size bag of Crunchy Flamin Hot Cheetos, and a half empty bottle of water. One member in particular brought a large Quarter Pounder Deluxe with bacon and a large 44 oz. of orange juice. The 44 oz. of orange juice sat near the houses on the opposite side of the alley towards the baseball hoop near a gray rushed fence. I analyzed each member to get a clearer description of who they are, from the inside and outside. Person A is tall, dark-skinned, and full of confidence. He is the owner of the basketball hoop and plays several sports, such as basketball, football, volleyball, track, etc. Person B loves eating, weighs less than obesity, but not obese, and smiles a lot. He only plays basketball. Person B also was the one who brought the large Quarter Pounder Deluxe with bacon and a large 44 oz. of orange juice. Person C is related to Person B and very tall. He plays football and described himself as less attractive and very shy. Person D is very loud, tall, and the participant with the unique tattoo described earlier. Person D’s expertise is football and baseball. Finally, Person E, who describes himself as goofy, tall, and a basketball player, is full of life. As a result, these five basketball players, who I observed and analyzed, are the main participants that make up this particular discourse community.

Verbal and Nonverbal Intercommunication

 There were many instances of nonverbal intercommunication during the observation. As I walked towards the alley, I lined myself up horizontally to a stack of broken bricks to get a closer view of this effective discourse community. Each member greeted each other with laughter and handshakes. The awkward handshakes lasted for 60 seconds. The handshakes, indeed, had a distinctive routine that requires each member to twist, turn, and shake each other hands elegantly. I could immediately sense a feeling of warmth and friendship amongst the teenage boys as I got in depth into their conversation and the meaning of their body language. I realized how this handshake, which is particular to this group of friends, helps them establish a feeling of comfort with each other and acceptance. I approached this form of communication as an outsider, so I knew I could not intervene or come between the practices of their handshakes. Meanwhile, I skipped introducing myself. For the matter of this particular community, an introduction would be a waste of time based off three reasons. The first reason would be Person A was my brother and the second reason was “The Imaginary Basketball Court,” was my backyard. Of course, the third reason would be the fact that an introduction would lead each member in this community into breaking character. Breaking character, to me, means that a participant slips out of character by behaving oppose of his/her actual self—a disconnection from how they act in the discourse community. This is why each member of this particular discourse community, while in character, needs to feel at ease while interacting with each other. I am not a member of this community and any interaction with me might have made the group less authentic.

 Another example of nonverbal interaction is when Person C blocks off the walking pathway by positioning himself in the center of the alley and points his arms straight up against the player who’s holding the ball. This lets the other members know that Person C wants to stop the person who is holding the ball from making a successful shot. Different body language and gestures within this discourse community is only comprehensible to the members that make up this group. By observing this basketball game, I felt as if the members within this community demonstrated expertise; as if their standards and values were only understood by community members and not outsiders. The way they communicated with the basketball made them look and act as experts.

 Additionally, there were also instances of verbal intercommunication. I was amazed with the conversations that the teenage boys were having. This is what I observed. Person A: “Wussup man you ready to get hoop on? Eating a large Quarter Pounder, you never gona learn how to dunk!” All the other members started laughing and rapidly squirted out millions of jokes back to back before the basketball game started. I noticed how joking before the game helps everyone warm up to each other and it encouraged each member to prove themselves to each other by causing them to be more competitive during the game. It’s a common norm that a plethora of teenagers used broken up English to define the meaning of a word in a simple way. The words “Wussup” and “Gona” are decoded differently in order to make the word more fashionable to the discourse community members as well as shortening up the meaning. Person A: said, “Wussup” and “Gona,” which means “What is up” and “Going to.” These were some of the words I noticed that members in this particular group understood quickly. Apart from the jokes, the language itself, which is often comprised of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), reveals the amount of respect and acceptance each participant has for each other. Their intonation is confident and often expresses how certain they feel about communication and the basketball game. For example, Person A: said, “…you never gona learn how to dunk!” I can tell how Person A challenges Person B by verbally communicating to Person B about Person B’s weakness, which puts Person A at ease. Overall, this form of communication not only pertains to this particular community, but it forces harsh criticism in a playful way to members that accept basketball as part of their discourse community.

Intertextuality

 There were many instances of intertextuality in the observation. Numerous times, the participants referenced other cultural and personal contexts outside of the immediate discourse community. For example, I saw Person A forcefully throw that ball to Person B. Person B grabbed the ball tightly with one arm and responded to Person A. This is what Person B said, “Shut your Dwyane Wade[[1]](#footnote-1) lookin ass up! The reference to Dwayne Wade is important because he is a basketball that a lot of teenage boys admire. Therefore, when Person B calls Person A “Dwayne Wade,” it’s a reference and a compliment to the skill of Person A. I assumed that Person B felt confident about the joke he made because he started dancing while successfully throwing the ball into the hoop with one hand while the other hand was finishing up the large Quarter Pounder that was brought from McDonalds. Then he allowed himself to breathe as he reached for the 44 oz. of orange juice that sat near the houses on the opposite side of the alley towards the baseball hoop near a gray rushed fence. Once everyone watched him take the last sip, they applaud him by clapping their hands as they proceeded to give Person B rude remarks. As I watched each player run, grab, and push each other for the ball, more rude remarks were made. But this time, the target was Person C. Person D, after constantly making straight shots into the hoop and falling onto the ground after every rude joke, he decided to grabbed his phone from his back pack in meandered towards all the members of the “The Imaginary Basketball Court.” All the members except for Person C broke out into laughter. Person D displayed an anorexic monkey with a cave in face that he found on Facebook. Person D: “Man look at you! They forgot to feed you brah!” This remark was referred to Person C. Then Person B became back the target. Person E: “All the food from that monkey was stolen by Person B and the oxygen too!” Of course everyone looked at Person C first then Person B who’s ironically is brothers with Person C. Person C responded, “Nigha, I bet I pull all you chicks on Facebook, Twitter, kik, and Instagram.” These references to other social media websites are significant because they act as sources of information between various social contexts and communities. Even though the worlds of social media and the basketball game are separate, they often overlap in conversation within the discourse community.

Frequency of Speech

 I decided to do a brief interview with one of the members of this particular group, although the other members were around. The person I chose was Person A. Person A was the one who played all the sports that each member in this particular group were experts in. Person A talked the most, as if he was in charge of “The Imaginary Basketball Court.” He also coached other members on how to position themselves for the ball and gave advice to each person on how to be superior in basketball. According to Person A, “I’m a handsome athlete that plays football, basketball, run track, etc. I can honestly say that the group started on its own. Everyone here plays multiple sports and basketball is a common sport that helps us stay in shape. I personally have to stay fit for the ladies! I don’t know Person C’s reason!” As I continued writing everything down, Person A continued to talk and I noticed that the other members started replying to Person A remarks about this particular discourse community. Back to Person A, “We ideally meet up every morning by contacting each other through Facebook, Twitter, Kik, or Instagram. If that doesn’t work, everyone either calls or show up at the “The Imaginary Basketball Court.” Then. In the middle of Person A’s interview, Person D shouted out these words, “Sports are our life and it keeps us busy instead of getting into the streets!” His speech caught everyone’s attention; especially, the first four simple words of this speech. What is important to note here is that while Person A was asserting their authority during this conversation, Person D offered the most valuable statement about the discourse community. This statement had to be true because every member stop joking and stared directly at Person D. I understood what this community meant to them from their facial expressions. Then they all looked at person A for guidance. I understood that the streets, to this discourse community, meant a life of crime, lots of parties, no goal or dreams, and the members might be likely to carry a title that signified the lack of education.

Conclusion

 This essay explored how language operates in a small group of African American teenage boys playing basketball. The use of language not only plays a major role in this particular discourse community, but language allows them to freely be themselves and express what each participant brings to the group. I learned that a discourse community was within this basketball community and it brought out the greater unity in each member as they leaned on each other for support. Like I noted before, Person D, “Sports are our life…” I only captured the aspects of these four simple words without mentally embracing or processing the whole entire sentence; a life being something more valuable than the dangerous alternatives that the social system offers. I understood that statement when I observed them and the life around them. What I finally concluded, was the basketball activity within this community was their life.

1. A popular NBA basketball player. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)