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Decoding Markers of Submissiveness Strategy in Creating Group Identity Among Athletes


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Abstract

The relationship between coaches and athletes is often characterized by hierarchical power dynamics, in which coaches significantly influence athletes' training, performance, and even personal lives. Consequently, the discourse between athletes and their coaches often reflects a delicate balance of power dynamics and eagerness to maintain good relationships. Within the context of team sports, athletes may adopt various strategies to establish and maintain their ingroup identity, including markers of submissiveness. These submissive behaviours can serve as a means for athletes to signal their willingness to conform to the group's norms and expectations and foster a sense of belonging and cohesion within the team. This paper explores the linguistic and communicative strategies employed by athletes to express submissiveness within this asymmetrical power structure, shedding light on how athletes negotiate their subordinate positions and align their behaviours with the expectations of the coach-athlete relationship. These insights can contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex power dynamics that shape coach-athlete interactions and ultimately highlight how athletes navigate and maintain their ingroup identity within the sporting context. (примљено: 26. фебруара 2025; прихваћено: 1. маја 2025)

1. Introduction

The coach-athlete relationship is a complex dynamic that plays a crucial role in an athlete's development and performance. This relationship is often characterized by a power differential, where the coach holds a position of authority, and the athlete is expected to be submissive to their guidance and instructions (Avcı et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2019; Vekarić, 2019). The importance of interpersonal communication skills for coaches has been well-documented in the literature. Coaches' communication style and their ability to establish a positive rapport with their athletes can contribute to the development of competitiveness and the achievement of sports results (Avcı et al., 2018; Choi et al., 2019; Vekarić/Trbojević-Milošević, 2020; Purnomo et al., 2021). Coaches who are able to understand and connect with their athletes on a personal level are more likely to foster a sense of trust and comfort, which in turn can enhance the athlete's motivation and performance. On the other hand, poor communication or a lack of understanding between the coach and athlete can lead to feelings of frustration, resentment, and a sense of being undervalued or misunderstood (Avcı et al., 2018: 350).

The strategy of submissiveness was identified as a dominant pattern of athletes' communication (Vekarić, 2019: 199). According to Tomić (2016), submissiveness in communication is employed to avoid conflict or to consciously accept an inferior position and/or agreement with the opinion of interlocutors. In the context of sport, this strategy serves to create and maintain the ingroup identity of athletes and support positive team dynamics to meet the institutional goals of every sporting organisation, i.e., to be competitive and achieve results.

Interlocutors often do not choose the most direct and easily comprehensible way to convey their message (Searle, 1969; Grice, 1975). Since the concept of politeness is embedded in the life experiences of members of any professional community and involves a subjective introspective process in which each member analyses and evaluates their own or another member's behaviour concerning the behavioural norms in that community (Eelen, 1999: 32–43), this analysis is underpinned by politeness strategies to understand fully the real meanings of athletes' utterances.

Many authors (Lakoff, 1973; Fraser, 1990; Kasper, 1990; Thomas, 1995; Ziling/Fang, 2020) emphasize politeness as the strategic behaviour of interlocutors aimed at avoiding conflict and achieving various interactive goals, including establishing, maintaining, strengthening, altering, or terminating social relationships. For Lakoff (1973, 1989), politeness is used to avoid offense and reduce friction in interaction. The role of politeness in professional interactions is further clarified by the concepts of positive and negative face, as developed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Positive face refers to the desire to be appreciated and accepted by others, while negative face encompasses the desire to maintain autonomy and avoid imposition. Speakers often employ various politeness strategies to reduce the potential impact of face-threatening acts (FTAs) in communication (Brown/Levinson, 1987: 68). In the coach-athlete interaction, using such politeness strategies as expressions of gratitude, apology, or the use of first names serves to address these face-saving needs and facilitate smooth and harmonious interactions (Hang, 2023: 78).

The inherent power asymmetry between coaches and athletes is a fundamental aspect of their relationships (Jowett, 2003; Borggrefe/Cachay, 2013). Submissiveness often results from a desire to avoid conflict, maintain harmony, and prevent isolation from the team (Sagar/Jowett, 2012: 156). This suggests that fear of exclusion can motivate compliance, even at personal risk. Balancing individual and ingroup interests is a crucial aspect of their interactions. Athletes frequently frame their statements to show concern for the team, thus confirming their commitment to group cohesion (Avcı et al., 2018: 351). Conflict avoidance is a dominant strategy, but when athletes want to express disagreement, they use mitigated language. This acknowledgment of the coach's authority highlights the use of face-saving strategies, such as detailed justifications and reassurances, to protect both the coach's and the athlete's "face" in potentially conflicting interactions (Bartholomew et al., 2009; Purnomo et al., 2021).

Foucault's (1980: 40) discourse analysis and his theory that knowledge and power intertwine to shape societal norms and individual identities provide the theoretical framework of this paper. Such concepts of discourse and power enable an understanding of the dynamics of social control and the constitution of reality.

What makes power so good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it produces and traverses things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, and produces discourses. It needs to be considered as a productive network that runs through the whole social body, much more than a negative instance whose focus is repression. (Foucault, 1980: 119)

Coaches typically hold more power than athletes, which creates uneven power dynamics where athletes are expected to show respect and compliance. Our paper, building on research like Matandare's work on politeness in social interactions (Matandare, 2022: 46), examines the pragmatic markers and power dynamics in athletes' utterances, which suggests that athletes consciously or subconsciously adopt specific communicative strategies to escape the power dynamics inherent in the sporting context.

Furthermore, this power imbalance can be aggravated by the significant influence coaches have over athletes' careers. Coaches often control playing time, position assignments, and opportunities for advancement, such as professional contracts. This dependence on the coach for success further emphasizes athletes' submissive behaviour, as they fear that challenging the coach's authority could negatively impact their sporting achievements. Therefore, athletes create a complex interplay of politeness, submissiveness, and strategic communication to carefully balance their desire to maintain a positive relationship with their coach with their own personal and sports goals.

Drawing upon these insights, this paper aims to examine the linguistic devices and communicative patterns used by athletes to convey submissiveness, which

signals the hierarchical power dynamics inherent in the coach-athlete relationship. Our findings indicate that the dominant strategy of submissiveness in athlete discourse is realized through politeness strategies, both positive and negative, along with the use of tentative language as an explicit acknowledgment of the coach's authority. The qualitative analysis reveals how athletes attempt to self-position while still signalling deference and compliance to avoid potential conflict and strengthen team unity.

2. Methods

This paper is a continuation of a larger corpus-driven analysis, which was part of a comprehensive study¹ designed to analyse and identify the typical communication structure between Serbian coaches and athletes and highlight the dominant strategies used in their interactions. The Discourse Completion Test (DCT) in the Serbian language was used to compile the corpus for the qualitative analysis presented in this paper.

2.1. Discourse completion test

The DCT is a widely used collection method in the field of pragmatics and cross-cultural communication to assess language learners' pragmatic competencies (Ogriemann, 2013: 229). The test consists of unfinished discourse sequences representing typical situations through short scenario descriptions and incomplete dialogues that respondents are required to complete (Blum-Kulka, 1982). Kedveš (2011) argued that DCT enables the creation of a model of responding that is viable in spontaneous forms of communication. By presenting a hypothetical scenario and prompting the testees to produce appropriate responses, researchers can gain insight into how respondents understand the pragmatic nuances of communication (Westby, 2020: 11). While this method has been valuable in understanding learners' pragmatic abilities, it also has several limitations that researchers took into account when using it for this qualitative linguistic analysis.

To avoid the factors that may shape the participants' responses, we have made the test using realistic coaching scenarios obtained from the DCTs completed by coaches, where they provided their wording for a situation description. Thus, authentic coaches' statements, some of which contained power markers like imperatives and commands, were used to elicit a specific athlete response (request, gratitude, refusal, etc.). In this way, the test simulated natural turn-taking. These real-life stimuli ensured more realistic reactions from athletes. According to Vekarić (2019), the natural context of the scenarios reinforces the hierarchical coach-athlete relationship, where the coach's authority is institutionally derived.

Due to the fact that participants may try to present themselves in a certain way or provide responses that they believe the researchers want to hear rather

1 Part of Gordana Vekarić's unpublished doctoral dissertation *Discourse of Power: Communication Models and Strategies in Interactions between Coaches and Athletes*.

than those accurately reflecting their actual linguistic behaviour, coaches were not allowed to be present during testing and did not have the opportunity to influence the respondents.

2.2. Corpus construction

The DCT was voluntarily and anonymously completed by 207 adult athletes, aged 18–25 (100 females and 107 males) from Serbia, during the course of 2018. Although the demographic data of the completed DCTs contained information about the respondents' gender, the analysis of potential differences or similarities in their answers would surpass the scope of this paper. Furthermore, this would require information on the gender of their respective coaches, which was not included in the DCTs, as this might affect the way they communicate.

Prior to testing, the researchers had contacted the club management through their respective national associations. They approved the testing for research purposes and scheduled the time for administering the DCTs. The test was distributed to athletes in their clubs either before or after their regular training sessions. The athletes were informed about the purpose of testing and they could decide on their own to proceed with the testing or leave. The research included only team sport athletes – namely, football, volleyball, water polo, basketball, and handball players from different clubs. All clubs were from the city of Belgrade.

We chose to conduct the DCT in team sports for two reasons. The first reason was the importance of corpus size. Since participation in the testing was voluntary, it was necessary to create conditions that would allow for efficient collection of responses from as many participants as possible. The second, equally important reason, was the anonymity of the participants, which would be hard to maintain in individual sports. Namely, testing a single person in the presence of a researcher could compromise anonymity and generally affect the reliance of the self-reported data.

The DCT consisted of nine situations that referred to two most usual sporting contexts: training and match, thus covering all processes relevant to the interaction of athletes and coaches: pedagogical, professional, and instructional. Out of 1,817 collected responses, a total of 1,225 athletes' responses were eligible for the linguistic analysis. Additionally, 242 statements not used for the linguistic analysis were interpreted to explain the role of silence in the strategy of submissiveness.

3. Results and discussion

Submissiveness strategy is a linguistic manifestation of the underlying hierarchical structure that characterizes the coach-athlete relationship. The qualitative linguistic analysis deployed in this paper reveals that athletes predominantly rely on a combination of politeness strategies, both positive and negative, as well as tentative or hedging language, which collectively function as explicit indicators of the athletes' compliance with the coach's authority. These communicative choices demonstrate how athletes consciously negotiate their social

positioning, seeking to present themselves in a manner that upholds respect. Such linguistic behaviour appears to be a deliberate effort to preempt potential conflict and reinforce a sense of ingroup cohesion. Due to inherent power asymmetries, athletes often adopt a submissive style of communication, consciously aligning themselves with the coach's authority to support a collaborative atmosphere and evade arguments. This strategic use of submissiveness reflects a desire to foster a cooperative and productive training/competitive environment. From a communicological standpoint, such behaviour highlights how power dynamics are constructed and sustained through language.

3.1. Linguistic analysis

From the point of linguistic analysis, we have identified three main layers that support the dominant submissive strategy used by athletes in communication with their coaches. Our study covers politeness strategies, tentative language, and self-positioning, all used to emphasise collective effort in creating ingroup identity.

3.1.1. Politeness

The concept of politeness reflects the prevailing behavioural norms in any professional community. Positive politeness focuses on building solidarity and expressing appreciation, while negative politeness aims to reduce the burden on the interlocutor.

Positive politeness strategies identified in our corpus are used as attempts to align individual needs with group goals. Such utterances can be directed towards coaches as interlocutors, but also towards fellow athletes to maintain a good atmosphere within the team.

Many of the athletes' responses demonstrate positive politeness in the form of exaggerated sympathy with the coach, which aims to affirm and strengthen their relationships.

- (1) „Šefe hvala na podršci, to mi mnogo znači.”
 (“Thanks for the support, boss, it means a lot to me.”)
- (2) „Hoću i hvala što vjerujete u mene.”
 (“I will and thank you for trusting me.”)

That strategy of trying to agree with the coach's stance by thanking them is intensified by markers of authority such as *coach* or *boss*. These examples show gratitude and acknowledgment of the coach's goodwill, indirectly complying with their authority.

Promises, as another positive politeness strategy, are particularly frequent in athletes' utterances and are used to underline the cooperative relationship with a coach. In some cases, they include references to specific future actions as a way to emphasize obedience and intent to improve. For example, an athlete might say,

- (3) „U redu, deliću više loptu.”
 (“All right, I’ll pass the ball more.”)
 (4) „Daću sve od sebe da uradim kako treba. Molim vas, dajte mi još jednu šansu.”
 (“I’ll do my best to do it right. Please give me one more chance.”)

This not only affirms their commitment to following the coach’s instruction, but also implicitly acknowledges previous shortcomings. Such promises often pose an FTA to the athlete’s own integrity, as they involve accepting personal guilt or responsibility for past mistakes. Therefore, the promise is made to prevent possible consequences of asking for an additional explanation of an athlete’s poor performance.

A similar FTA occurs through explanations or justifications, which precede promises and often serve as statements of responsibility.

- (5) „Nisam dobro shvatio, i potruđiću se da u sledećem napadu to popravim.”
 (“I didn’t understand it well, and I’ll make sure to fix it in the next attack.”)
 (6) „Napravićemo preokret.”
 (“We will make a comeback.”)
 (7) “Popravićemo sve.”
 (“We’ll fix everything.”)

When athletes provide these justifications, as in example (5), they typically frame themselves as solely accountable for their performance. In some cases (6, 7), taking responsibility in the form of a promise is done on behalf of the entire team.

The third most common positive politeness strategy of looking for shared context or a mutual goal, i.e., winning the game, is always directed at the teammates as interlocutors. It reflects their attempt to align individual needs with ingroup goals, mainly expressed by using *inclusive we*.

- (8) „Tako je, bree. Idemo, bolje smo.”
 (“That’s right, gee. Let’s go, we are better.”)
 (9) „Tako je, treneru. Idemo djevojke, mi to možemo, bolje smo od njih samo ukoliko se držimo sistema.”
 (“That’s right, coach. Let’s go girls, we can do this, we’re better than them as long as we stick to the system.”)

The above utterances emphasize shared objectives to boost the motivation of the teammates. In the latter example (9), an athlete opts to combine several elements, first by establishing an agreement with the coach’s instructions and showing respect for their authority. Additionally, a sense of shared identity and purpose is created to encourage teammates. In the end, the condition of adhering to the system suggests that the team needs collective effort and discipline to succeed.

Negative politeness strategies aimed at reducing imposition on the coach include apologetic language and indirect requests that signal deference and minimize imposition. Such utterances balance recognition of the coach's authority with an assertion of individual preferences.

Indirectness in requests is the most expressed negative politeness strategy. Vekarić (2019) claims that indirect phrasing can balance deference to the coach's authority with the expression of personal opinion. Such phrasing minimizes confrontation by prefacing disagreement with an acknowledgment of the coach's position.

- (10) *„Ako Vam nije problem da mi pokažete još jednom danas mi je koncentracija slabija.”*
(“If it's not a problem, please show me how to do it once more, my concentration is weak today.”)

Instead of making a direct request for continued support, the athlete frames the utterance as a conditional statement, subtly transferring the initiative to the coach in order to prevent her request being declined.

Most often, indirect requests are posed by using the modal verb, which can be softened by *please* and justified with some explanations.

- (11) *„Molim vas možete li još jednom da objasnite, nisam najbolje shvatila vježbu?”*
(“Can you explain again, please, I didn't quite get the exercise?”)

This utterance shows a progression from a polite request for help to a justification that explains a perceived failure. In this way, the athlete balances accountability with an expression of dependence on the coach.

Another negative politeness strategy includes apologies oriented to the coach.

- (12) *„Izvinjavam se, neće se više ponoviti.”*
(“I apologize, it won't happen again.”)
 (13) *„Izvinite, mislila sam da ovako imamo više šanse da postignemo gol.”*
(“Sorry, I thought this way we had a better chance of scoring a goal.”)

The above example of an explicit apology presents a face-saving act (FSA) by which the athlete tries to save the coach's negative face and repair the reason for the apology. The athlete shows deference and takes responsibility for the action by offering a commitment to avoid repeating questionable behaviour and giving reassurance to minimize future FTAs. Sometimes, the apologies focus on mitigating the perceived offense by providing a rationale (13). The use of the informal apology *sorry* instead of the more formal *I apologize* softens the tone and makes the apology less imposing. This apology also addresses the coach's negative face by suggesting the action was not intended to cause harm, but rather to achieve a shared goal.

This tendency to establish a balance between deference to the coach's authority and taking responsibility for failure is crucial in high-stakes environments like sports.

3.1.2. Tentative language

Examination of athlete responses reveals the prevalence of hedging, which serves to soften their utterances and behaviour, and thus prevent potential conflict. Hyland (1996: 103, 156) points out that hedging has various functions, including weakening the strength of a claim, showing respect, and indicating uncertainty. As confirmed in previous studies (Jowett, 2003; Watts, 2003; Li/Haque, 2019; Mifdal/Lewis, 2023), the use of tentative language in our corpus can unveil the athletes' level of lack of confidence, uncertainty, or caution in their utterances aimed at avoiding direct disagreement. Most of the identified mitigating devices can be classified, according to the taxonomy of linguistic mechanisms functioning as hedges proposed by Trbojević-Milošević (2004: 76–93), into modal verbs, non-factual verbs, modal adverbs, epistemic modal expressions, and semi-modals. However, epistemic modal expressions and semi-modals were not identified in our corpus.

The dominant group of hedges are modal verbs *can*, *could*, and *may*, which are deployed in requests to attenuate the force of a request or a potentially confrontational statement.

- (14) „Mogu li samo pokušati? Ako ne budem mogla, reći ću vam.”
 (“Can I just try? If I can't do it, I'll let you know.”)

Although the athlete is making a direct request, its form resembles a question more than a demand. In this way, the coach is given the option to say no, which is a usual form of hedging in hierarchical contexts where deference is important (Matandare, 2022: 50). The use of *just* further minimises the perceived imposition and downplays the significance of the request. The choice of the verb “try” implies that the athlete is unsure of success and is not committed to achieving the goal, but only to making an attempt. That way, they reduce a threat to their own face. A subsequent conditional statement further mitigates the potential for confrontation between the interlocutors.

- (15) „Možete li samo još jednom da mi pokažete ako Vam nije problem, mislim da mi ova tehnika ne pogoduje.”
 (“Could you please show me how to do it again if it's not a problem? I think this technique doesn't suit me.”)

By accompanying the request with an explanation of personal learning preferences, the athlete avoids challenging the coach's methods while still advocating for their own needs. In one single utterance, we can identify multiple hedges. *Could you please* is a polite and indirect request, softening the demand. The conditional clause

if it's not a problem further mitigates the imposition. The non-factual verb *think* expresses a degree of uncertainty about the suitability of the technique.

Non-factual verbs are used to soften statements, making them less confrontational. Besides *think* in the above example, we have identified the non-factual verbs *believe* and *seem* in our corpus. Both *seem* and *believe* introduce a degree of uncertainty or subjectivity into the statements. They are not stating facts, but rather conveying perceptions or opinions.

(16) „Izgleda da bi bilo bolje.”

(“It seems it would be better.”)

(17) „Nije to lako, ali ako smo došli do finala verujem da ekipa zna da reaguje u najtežim trenucima hladne glave.”

(“It's not easy, but if we've made it to the final, I believe the team knows how to keep a cool head in the most challenging moments.”)

The use of *seem* expresses a tentative assessment of a situation. By avoiding a definitive claim, the athlete does not commit to making things better, but acknowledges the likelihood of improvement. On the contrary, *believe* indicates the athlete's personal conviction and trust in the team's ability. The speaker believes, based on past performance, that the team possesses the necessary qualities to handle pressure. However, there is still an element of uncertainty, as the speaker is not stating this as absolute knowledge.

The most versatile hedges in our corpus are modal adverbs, including *probably*, *maybe*, *perhaps*, and *hopefully*. They indicate uncertainty and lessen the force of the statement. The speaker is not definitively claiming what is better, only suggesting what might be better.

(18) „Važi, tako je možda i bolje.”

(“Okay, maybe it's better this way.”)

(19) „U redu, verovatno sam i preterao malo, samo sam želeo da bude bolje za tim.” (‘‘All right, probably I overdid it a bit, I just wanted it to be better for the team.”)

(20) „Ne znam šta mi je, ne mogu ništa dobro da uradim. Valjda ću najzad početi da igram kako treba.”

(“I don't know what's wrong with me, I can't do anything right. Hopefully, I'll finally start playing properly.”)

(21) „Možda je tako najbolje. Bolje da budem odsutna jednu utakmicu nego da rizikujem da se povredim na duži period, i da ostavim ekipu na cedilu.”

(“Perhaps that's for the best. It's better for me to miss one game than risk injuring myself for a longer period and leaving the team hanging.”)

Modal adverbs *maybe* and *probably* express uncertainty and open the possibility for alternative perspectives. Similarly, *hopefully* underlines a desire rather than a certainty, hedging the expectation of improved performance. The modal adverb

perhaps is used as a mitigation device to avoid direct disagreement, signalling deference to coaches' decisions.

3.1.3. Self-positioning

The existing literature identifies athletes' self-positioning as a nuanced phenomenon that encompasses the strategic use of various linguistic devices to manage interpersonal relationships in the coaching context (Sagar/Jowett, 2012; Vekarić/Trbojević-Milošević, 2020; Izquierdo/Anguera, 2021). The athletes use these language devices as tools for constructing identity within the training and competition environment.

Personal deixis, as one form of "pointing via language" (Yule, 1996: 9), provides deep insights into how athletes assert their identity and negotiate their role in communication with both coaches and teammates. The dominant use of the first-person pronoun *I* in athlete discourse often signals self-positioning about performance, decision-making, and accountability.

(22) *„Šefe, ja sam sprema kao zapeta puška za naredne izazove.“*

(“Boss, I’m loaded for bear for the next challenges.”)

(23) *„Ok, moja greška, pokažite mi još jednom.“*

(Okay, my mistake, show me once more.”)

In example (22), personal deixis is used to express confidence emphasised with a metaphor, whereas in example (23) the athlete accounts for the failure and acknowledges self-blame. This form of deixis is particularly relevant during corrective feedback sessions, where athletes either claim credit for success or express self-criticism.

Athletes use the first-person plural pronoun *we* to include the coach or the team in their discourse. Most commonly, athletes position themselves as a part of the team. Such utterances are always directed to fellow players instead of replying to the coach, though in DCTs they were asked to simulate the response to the coach exclusively. This affirms that the athletes protect their face by seeking to position themselves as a part of a team within the coaching process. The dominant linguistic device in this sense is the use of *inclusive we*.

(24) *„Tako je! Moramo da rizikujemo i preuzmemo stvar u svoje ruke. Nemamo šta da izgubimo.“*

(“That’s right! We have to risk it and take matters into our own hands. We have nothing to lose.”)

(25) *„Igraćemo timski.“*

(“We will play as a team.”)

As we can see in the above examples, the choice of *we* instead of *I* can diffuse responsibility and avoid individual blame. It can also emphasize team unity and shared effort. *Inclusive we* is an important linguistic device, especially when it

is necessary to boost motivation and achieve the final result for the team. Some of these utterances even show taking responsibility on behalf of all players by promising team play.

The athletes very rarely use the second-person singular pronoun *you*, when talking to their coaches. In the majority of athletes' responses, we note the so-called social deixis, a subtype of personal deixis, which involves formal address through the use of pronouns, vocatives, and honorifics (Jelić/Rađenović, 2022: 344).

(26) *„Treneru, ja se trudim ali očigledno ne mogu da uradim ono što Vi očekujete od mene.”*

“Coach, I’m trying, but obviously I can’t do what you expect from me.”

(27) *„Treneru, ja ne kapiram ovo, jel možete da ponovite?”*

“Coach, I don’t get this, can you repeat?”

The frequent choice of the honorifics *coach*, *boss*, or *Sir*, accompanied with a pronoun or verb ending for the second-person plural, expresses the athletes' understanding of their position in this institutional discourse and their eagerness to convey respect and distance in addressing the authority.

Athletes are very cautious when they feel they need to oppose their coaches. They use submissive strategies to downplay resistance and subordinate their individual desires for the sake of the team.

(28) *„Okay, ako vi mislite da je to najbolje za tim.”*

“Okay, if you think that’s best for the team.”

By using tentative devices, the athlete accepts the coach's advice, signalling loyalty to the collective goal over personal ambition, and abandons the initial wish to question the coach's decision. The fear of exclusion further motivates compliance, even at personal risk.

Personal deixis is highlighted in athletes' evaluation of their performance, especially when expressing self-criticism or doubt. They frequently downplay their competence or take responsibility for mistakes to maintain harmony:

(29) *„Ljutim se na sebe jer i sama znam da mogu bolje, ali mi prijaju vaše reči, i idemo sve ispočetka.”*

“I’m angry at myself because I know I can do better, but your words are encouraging. Let’s start over.”

(30) *„Ja hoću, treneru, i pokušavam, ali vidite da mi ne ide.”*

“I want to, coach, and I’m trying, but you can see it’s not working for me.”

Self-criticism reduces the potential for external criticism by the coach. However, athletes may use self-critical statements to align with the coach's perspective and demonstrate their willingness to improve. In some cases (26), self-criticism reflects

internal frustration and negative self-perceptions, and it may lead to performance anxiety.

Thus, by proactively acknowledging their shortcomings, athletes preempt criticism from the coach and signal that they are receptive to feedback. This linguistic move strengthens the athlete-coach relations and builds mutual trust.

3.2. Power dynamics in communication

The relationship between coaches and athletes is a complex one, marked by distinct power dynamics and communication patterns. Coaches often employ specific linguistic strategies to reinforce their authority and shape athletes' behaviour (Vekarić, 2019: 118). However, their authority is additionally strengthened by the athletes themselves. That is confirmed by the dominant strategy deployed by athletes, i.e., the strategy of submissiveness (Vekarić, 2019: 200). From a communicological perspective, the athletes' responses reflect the inherent asymmetry in power between the coach and athlete, while submissiveness is established due to a desire to avoid disagreement, maintain harmony, build team unity, and prevent isolation from the team.

Athletes consciously adopt submissive communication to avoid conflict, show alignment with the coach's authority and goals, and strengthen the cohesion of the team as a unit under the coach's leadership. By employing submissive language, athletes create a smoother and more cooperative interaction with the coach. This, in turn, can contribute to a more positive and productive training environment where athletes feel comfortable following instructions and working towards shared objectives. This aligns with Jowett's (2003: 450) emphasis on the importance of a positive coach-athlete relationship for athlete development and performance success (Davis et al., 2019: 3). This conscious adoption of submissiveness may also serve as a strategic tool for athletes to gain favour with the coach, potentially leading to increased playing time, better positions, and other advantages.

3.2.1. Avoiding conflict to show alignment with the coach's authority and goals

Statements of obedience are identified as the most frequent submissive strategy in the analysed corpus, appearing in as many as 526 instances of short responses. They can be categorized into two primary groups. Our first group comprises short one- and two-word formulaic expressions (468) whose interpretation is used to achieve balance in conversation. In sports as high-pressure environments, such statements often serve as flexible, communicative tools to signal sincere agreement, apologies, but sometimes also irony.

These statements of obedience also align with what Goffman (1959) defines as "patterns of appropriate conduct". Tomić (2016: 137) emphasizes that "submissiveness in communication is recognized in behaviour aimed at avoiding conflict or the conscious acceptance of an inferior position and agreement with another's opinion." However, in some cases, respondents used these expressions because the situation constrained them. Namely, in competitive settings, they have to react very quickly due to physical engagement in an activity.

For example, in a high-pressure match scenario, an athlete might simply say “Okay” without fully processing the instruction, signalling compliance rather than genuine understanding. Such immediate responses can function as pragmatic fillers, maintaining the flow of interaction between the coach and the athlete. According to Jelić and Polovina (2024: 200), minimal responsive statements and comments include exclamations and particles, and certain vocal sounds, which can appear independently as complete statements, such as *OK, yes, c’mon, gee, uh*, etc. but they can also be accompanied by a longer clause or phrase. The authors further explain that non-minimal responses and comments can take the form of individual lexemes, such as adverbs and adjectives, or phrases, or they can manifest as short clauses. The most dominant short response in our research is a neutral *OK*. Other formulaic expressions include *all right, agreed, yeah, right, understood, sure, good, I agree, clear, no problem, as you say*. Our findings confirm that some of them have a distinctly responsive function, such as *yes, gee, nope*, and can be used independently to affirm or deny, signalling agreement or disagreement with the interlocutor, while others, like *OK, sure*, can independently indicate acceptance of a proposal or advice.

However, in training settings, these words could signal enthusiastic acceptance, reluctant compliance, or even concealed frustration depending on the tone, pace, and context. The interpretation often depends on the prosodic cues – such as pitch, intonation, and rhythm – accompanying the statement. However, since prosodic elements are not captured in written questionnaires, the analysis in this context faces certain limitations.

In the second, much smaller group (58), short responses are supplemented by promises, hedging, explanations/justifications, or gratitude expressions to show alignment with the coach’s authority and goals.

(31) „U redu, treneru, kako vi kažete.”

(“Alright, coach, as you say.”)

(32) „Naravno šefe.”

(“Of course, boss.”)

These responsive utterances represent the recipient’s reaction to various requests, proposals, or explanations. Most commonly, short responses express agreement with the coach’s proposals, ideas, and requests, e.g., *alright, sure, agreed, of course, deal, definitely*, etc. Some other expressions also have the discursive function of obedience to show alignment with the coach’s authority, by expressing gratitude, such as *thank you, it’s not a problem, everything is ok*.

Another marker signalling the willingness of athletes to respect coaches’ authority is a description of the lack of any answer. The corpus includes 242 statements in which the players stated that they would prefer to remain silent, e.g., *I’m silent, I would be silent, I remain silent, I would remain silent, Nothing, I wouldn’t say anything, I don’t say anything, I wouldn’t comment, I’m not talking, I don’t respond, I wouldn’t respond to him*.

Tomić (2016: 17) claims that silence as a communicology phenomenon can be realized when listening to the interlocutor, but also as a decision to refuse to respond. Silence can be a sign of deep and functional participation in communication. In this particular interaction between athletes and coaches, athletes are mostly expected to listen to their coaches, so this can be understood as a preferred option in situations of increased tension and pressure due to unfavourable results of the game. During matches, athletes also have limited conditions to react verbally due to physical effort and physical distance between the interlocutors. In these critical situations, players opting for silence is a signal that they do not want to question the coach's authority, which can also undermine the atmosphere in the team. Given that silence does not result from external prohibition by the coach, the choice not to respond is the result of the dominant strategy of submissiveness in relations and confirms the power asymmetry in athlete-coach interaction. Therefore, strategic use of silence can preserve communication channels as people can react with silence to a situation of anger or verbal quarrel (Jaworski, 1992: 49).

Unless these descriptions contain an additional explanation, it is not always clear that they are a sign of submission since they may indicate quiet resistance or even indifference to the coach, e.g., *I would ignore his words*. Our findings show that a large number of these responses contain an additional explanation, which confirms that the absence of speech is a result of a form of self-censorship and calculated avoidance of conflict and potentially negative consequences, such as benching or dismissal from the game (Vekarić, 2019: 239). These supplementing explanations, such as *the coach knows best, the coach is the one who's in charge on the field*, and *out of respect, I would remain silent*, emphasise deference to the coach's expertise, and evade potential conflict.

Moreover, despite the corpus being generated by collecting written answers, athletes sometimes described other forms of nonverbal behaviours, such as avoidance of eye contact, fidgeting, or turning away, which could be interpreted as additional markers of submissiveness and a strategy to avoid conflict.

3.2.2. Strengthening the team cohesion

Effective communication is crucial for success in sports because it fosters strong relationships between coaches and athletes, as well as among teammates. In the context of team-based activities, communication not only facilitates the exchange of information and ideas, but also plays a crucial role in strengthening team cohesion. (Weimar et al., 2017; Cranmer et al., 2020; Zuberbühler et al., 2020). In sport, winning is the primary goal, and everyone involved understands the significance of commitment required for both training and competitions (Borggreffe/Cachay, 2013: 7).

From a communicational perspective, athletes use submissive communication to achieve a team's collective identity and goals. The strategy of submissiveness is shaped by the athletes' relationship with the club and the coach as an authority figure representing the club as an institution.

Although the questionnaire was not intended to investigate the communication between teammates, the corpus contained numerous utterances in which athletes opted to speak to their teammates and not to the coach. These utterances were identified in responses referring to the context of matches and their only aim was to enhance collective efficacy and help manage difficult situations, in which members rely on each other to achieve their goals (Cooke et al., 2015: 64).

A variety of markers used to strengthen solidarity with teammates are attention-grabbing devices (Vekarić, 2019: 193) such as *let's go, c'mon, we can do this, come on now, that's right, no giving up, keep it strong, keep going*, etc. They are used in critical game situations when the coach is perceived as a source of distress. Thus, athletes switch to addressing their teammates instead of facing the coach's reprimands.

(33) „Ajmo devojke, možemo mi to.”

(“C'mon, girls, we can do it.”)

(34) „Ajmo momci, idemo do kraja nema opraštanja.”

(“C'mon guys, we're going all the way, no holding back.”)

In these situations, teammates are more important, but this shift in the orientation of communication may be a result of athletes' wish to pretend to agree with their coaches instead of entering into a discussion with them. These attention-grabbing expressions show the initiative to become accountable. Furthermore, submissive communication in this sense acts as a tool for maintaining harmony and focusing on institutional objectives – accomplishing results.

In many instances, the goals of the team are explicitly placed above the popularity of the individual, and any behaviour that threatens the team's reputation is self-censored. This is sustained by the use of phrases, e.g., *play for the team, we are a team, I'm a team player, the team comes first*, etc., in athletes' utterances.

(35) „U pravu ste, igram za tim, ne za sebe.”

(“You're right, I play for the team, not for myself.”)

The above example shows that athletes are well aware that individual efforts contribute to larger collective goals and that they are ready to share responsibility. In their utterances, they highlight the importance of subordinating personal interests to the greater good of the team. This creates a stronger sense of unity and commitment to the joint objective.

In several utterances, athletes can opt for an indirect apology for individual actions that may negatively impact the team and try to remind themselves of the shared purpose of the team members.

(36) „Ej, momci, stanite malo, ne treba da se svadamo, ako budemo bili tim uspećemo sve.”

("Hey, guys, wait a second, we shouldn't argue, if we are a team, we will succeed.")

The above example reflects the importance of teamwork in past successes and sets the stage for continued collaboration in the future. Teamwork is valued as a key factor in achieving desired outcomes.

4. Conclusion

This paper points to the complexity of athletes' discourse used in interaction with their coaches, with clear manifestations of the forms of submission.

From a linguistic perspective, the athletes' responses reveal a careful balance of positive and negative politeness strategies. By using the positive strategies of emphasizing shared goals, mutual support, and confidence in their abilities, athletes aim to create a positive and cohesive team environment. On the other hand, athletes use apologetic language and indirect requests to show deference and to reduce the threat to the coach's face. The occurrence of multiple hedging devices in athletes' responses suggests that they strategically use hedging when expressing uncertainty, making requests, offering suggestions, and showing deference to the coach's authority. Due to the potential power imbalance in the coach-athlete relationship, athletes frequently opt for certain linguistic devices to assert their position in this interaction.

Power dynamics are reflected in a dyad of attempts to avoid conflict and efforts to maintain ingroup cohesion and assert athletes' individual perspectives without disrupting team cohesion. These communication patterns underscore the athletes' preference for institutional goals and harmonious relationships over their individuality.

The findings in our study confirm that athletes employ a spectrum of linguistic and communicative strategies to express submissiveness, which reflects their negotiation in addressing authority and preserving team unity. These strategies range from pseudo-agreement and conflict avoidance to explicit yet mitigated athletes' efforts to balance individual autonomy with team cohesion. Although this paper is based on a written corpus of responses which may not accurately reflect the complexities of oral communication, since factors such as tone, body language, and turn-taking in conversation are not captured in written utterances, it provided a valuable overview of communication patterns employed by athletes. Nevertheless, a more comprehensive investigation into athlete-coach communication should include recording authentic situations both in training and competitive environments.

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Сажетак

ДЕКОДИРАЊЕ МАРКЕРА СТРАТЕГИЈЕ СУБМИСИВНОСТИ У КРЕИРАЊУ ГРУПНОГ ИДЕНТИТЕТА СПОРТИСТА

Однос између тренера и спортиста често карактерише хијерархијска динамика моћи, у којој тренери значајно утичу на тренинг, перформансе, па и лични живот спортиста. Стога интеракција између спортиста и тренера одражава деликатан баланс моћи и жељу за одржавањем добрих односа. У контексту тимских спортова, спортисти примењују различите стратегије како би успоставили и одржали идентитет групе, укључујући ознаке субмисивности. Овакво субмисивно понашање спортисти

користе да покажу своју спремност да се придржавају норми и очекивања групе и подстакну осећај припадности и кохезије унутар тима. Овај рад истражује језичке и комуникативне стратегије које спортисти користе да изразе субмисивност унутар ове асиметричне структуре моћи и описује начине на који спортисти преговарају о својим подређеним позицијама и усклађују своје понашање са очекивањима у односу тренер-спортиста. Ови увиди могу допринети дубљем разумевању сложене динамике моћи која обликује интеракцију тренера и спортиста и указати на то како спортисти управљају тим односима и одржавају свој идентитет групе у спортском контексту.

Кључне речи:

спортисти, језичка средства, комуникативни маркер, субмисивност, идентитет групе