

James H. Overfield
University of Vermont

Sports Terminology and the French Language in the Age of Louis XIV

Among the areas of modern life that have been influenced by sport, few have been affected as much as language. Each sport has its own vocabulary which defines and describes its rules, players, equipment, strategies, and game situations. Sports words and phrases have also come to be used routinely in figures of speech, metaphors, and proverbial expressions. Thus speakers of contemporary American English, whether they are knowledgeable of baseball or not, understand that when a person “strikes out,” that person has failed; when a person “hits a grand slam,” she or he has succeeded spectacularly; and when a person has been “thrown a curve,” she or he has been fooled and perhaps deceived.

The subject of sports-related figures of speech in modern languages has generated a modest but growing body of scholarship. A widely shared assumption in this literature is that the impact of sports on language is a recent phenomenon. Only in the past two centuries, it is presumed, did sports have a sufficiently wide and knowledgeable following to affect everyday language. Thus studies of sports and language rarely go back further than the late 1800s and most concentrate on the twentieth century.

This paper shows that sports affected the French language long before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its conclusions are based mainly on information derived from two famous French dictionaries published in the 1690s: Charles Furetiere’s *Le dictionnaire universel* (1690) and the French Academy’s *Le dictionnaire de l’académie française* (1694). Some material is also drawn from dictionaries by Henri Estienne, Randle Cotgrave, and Abel Boyer.

The paper shows that most of the sports metaphors and figures of speech used in late seventeenth-century France were applied to everyday activities that involved competition. Business transactions and legal matters, especially lawsuits, in which losers and winners were determined by skill and preparation, but also by luck, seemed to the French to resemble the actions and results seen in billiard rooms and tennis courts. Interestingly, the act of conversation also had its share of sport-related figures of speech. Establishing one’s superiority in an activity that put a premium on forcefulness, wit, and cleverness was, so it appears, viewed as a form of competition, and thus similar to sport.

Sports' extensive influence on the everyday speech of educated, urban French at the end of the seventeenth century has important implications for sport history. Historians of European sports have tended to dismiss the early modern period as a time when interest in sports and games declined. This study provides evidence of widespread sports consciousness in early modern France, suggesting that the traditional views of sports development may need to be modified.