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Arsène Didn't See It: Coaching, Research and the Promise of a Discursive Psychology

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Introduction

It has become something of a canonical truism for anyone who follows the English Premier League that Arsenal FC coach Arsène Wenger, whenever quizzed in a post-match interview about a possible misdemeanour committed by any of his own players during the preceding 90 minutes, will most likely claim to have “not seen” the pertinent incident. For example, when asked to comment upon an on-field altercation between Arsenal teammates Emmanuel Adebayor and Nicklas Bendtner during a League Cup tie with local rivals Tottenham Hotspur in 2008, Wenger explicitly declared “I did not know anything about it. I didn't see it,” at which point the questioning turned to other matters. Intuitively, we may well find ourselves questioning the veracity of this claim. Did Wenger, we might ask, *really* not see what happened, and was therefore *unable* to answer questions regarding the incident? Or, more insidiously, did he actually see everything and only *claim* ignorance such that he would not then *have* to answer questions regarding the incident? In order to unpick the mystery of Wenger's honesty (and/or memory) here, we need to grasp the character of the actual reality he is talking *about* [1]. Was Wenger actually looking at the events in question at the time they occurred? Was he close enough to see properly? Was his view obstructed? Did he blink at the moment it happened? If the words and the world “match-up,” Wenger can be said to be telling the truth. If they are apparently at odds, then we can assert that he is either mistaken, his recall is malfunctioning or (if we surmise he has motivation to do so) he is actually lying. As Derek Edwards [2] summarises, from this intuitive, social-cognitive point of view:

“Cognition and reality are like two sides of a coin. If we want to know about cognition, we need to take account of the world, hold reality constant and vary it systematically, so that we can discern the workings of the mind. If we want to know about reality, it is cognition and other human foibles that have to be held constant or under control. We have to assure ourselves that we are not deluded, mistaken or misinformed, seeing what we expect or want to see, and this may require systematic methods for countering the vagaries of the mind.”

There are, however, two key complications in assessing the truth of Wenger’s claim using this mode of reasoning:

1. What if it is not possible to discern “reality” here? What if we cannot say for certain whether or not the incident *was* actually seen? In such a case, how can we provide a firm assessment of the status of Wenger’s claim? And;
2. If we are to presume that the ways in which Wenger processes reality are fallible, partial and/or subject to fabrication, how can we place such *total* faith in our own capacity, as analysts, to discern the same reality objectively? How can we confidently assert that our claims regarding “what he actually saw” are more reliable than his own? Are we not also subject to partiality, subjectivity and bias? Assessing the “truth” of any claim becomes a rather greater problem if we consider “...reality to be *itself* a product of human perceptions, artefacts, practices and accounts.” [2]

The first of these issues gives us cause to question the limits of our own assertions; the second asks of us whether we can (or should) really be making those assertions with any confidence at all [3]. What we can assert with absolute clarity in this case, however, is that through the making of the claim that he “didn’t see” (be it true *or* false):

1. Wenger's situated responsibility to answer any further questions relating directly to the incident was systematically negated. The interviewer did not (and could not *reasonably*) expect him to comment authoritatively upon an incident he has not seen with his own eyes, so to speak. Indeed, for the interviewer to continue pursuing the topic in the light of Wenger's claim would have risked *implying* that the Arsenal coach was, in fact, not being entirely honest.
2. This, in turn, forestalled the likelihood of Wenger having to perform any connected and potentially problematic or embarrassing verbal actions such as, for example, having to actively criticise (or excuse) Adebayor and/or Bendtner in a public forum

Thus, while we can run into serious problems when attempting to divine the absolute "truth" in Wenger's claim, it is perfectly possible for us to describe what that claim methodically does, as an interpersonal *action*, during this interview. Fundamentally, it makes it very (socially) difficult for the interviewer to extract any further details regarding (or related to) the incident without to some extent implying that Wenger has, in fact, lied. Or, to view it from another perspective, Wenger placed the interviewer in position whereby he could either (a) "drop" the topic, or (b) pursue an inferably hostile course of verbal action that could well have threatened the "local social solidarity" [4], i.e. breach a commonly-understood normative standard of conduct in conversation. We can generally assume that, when engaging someone in factual discourse about an event, implying that they are a liar might just cause a few interpersonal problems; to do so publically (even *with* evidence, of which, in this case, there was none) might just cause a few more. In this way, Wenger exerted a *normative pressure* [5] upon the interviewer to move the conversation along to other matters, without having to explicitly ask him to (an act with its own ramifications).

Harvey Sacks, conversation and psychology

This short analysis of an exchange between an interviewer and a professional coach parallels some paradigm-shifting observations made by Harvey Sacks [5], initially during a study of telephone calls to a suicide prevention centre in the 1960s. The manifest problem identified by staff at this centre was with getting callers to identify themselves. As standard practice, at the beginning of any call, staff members would introduce themselves by name; in some cases, the caller would give their own name in reply. Some would not, however, and some would even refuse to do so when explicitly asked for a name further into the conversation. For Sacks, this raised the issue of *when*, in such a conversation, it might become apparent to a speaker that the other person was withholding their name, which in turn led him to consider the following opening exchange in an analytically novel manner:

Extract 1: (from Sacks, 1992a)

1. A: This is Mr Smith, may I help you
2. B: I can't hear you
3. A: This is Mr. Smith¹
4. B: Smith

The conversation then proceeded, once the “not hearing” had been resolved, without the caller (B) attempting to provide a name in reply. Rather than simply treat the first utterance made by the caller (line 2) as a transparent *representation* of a problem he was actually having with hearing Mr. Smith, however, Sacks attended to what that utterance was actually *doing* in the particular situation. Robin Wooffitt [6] elaborates this analysis thusly:

“[Sacks] observes that there are norms concerning where in conversation certain kinds of activities should happen; and in conversation between strangers, names tended to be exchanged

¹ Note: within Sacks' own transcription conventions, underlining denotes speaker emphasis.

in initial turns. Developing this, Sacks argues that the caller is using the utterance ‘I can’t hear you’ to fill the slot in the conversation where it would be expected that he return his name.”

This norm is familiar to all of us, if we give it due consideration. The longer a conversation with a stranger persists without us knowing their name, the more socially awkward it becomes to ask for it. Indeed, it becomes progressively more important to apologise for the question; “I’m really sorry, but what was your name again?” By filling the space where his name would normatively be provided with something else, the caller above thereby finds a practical method for avoiding identifying himself, *without actively declining to*.

This observation became the foundation of Sacks’ entire programme of conversation analytic investigation; exhaustively analysing huge numbers of extracts of naturally-occurring talk, Sacks argued that even in the most apparently mundane examples of human verbal interaction a distinct, task-directed organisation can be observed:

‘If...we figure or guess or decide that whatever humans do, they are just another animal after all, maybe more complicated than others but perhaps not noticeably so, then whatever humans do can be examined to discover some way they do it...That is, we may...take it that there is order at all points.’ [7]

Psychology without cognition

To those unfamiliar with Sacks’ work, or subsequent work in the paradigm he established, such analysis can appear almost spurious on the grounds that speakers “...couldn’t have thought that fast.” [5] However, and as Sacks himself forcefully argues, people do not actively pre-script everything they say. In fact, most talk is accomplished “on-the-fly” [2]. Despite this, however, people still make compelling arguments, execute complex

interpersonal tasks and adhere to intricate norms of politeness and conduct. Everyday talk, like many other skills that we have been practicing since childhood, is something we become very good at. Thus, when we study people talking, we should not:

“...worry about how fast they’re thinking. First of all, don’t worry that they’re ‘thinking’. Just try to come to terms with how it is that the thing comes off. Because you’ll find they can do these things...So just let the materials fall as they may.” [5]

It is also important to be mindful that what Sacks is expressing here is not in any sense a denial of the role of “mental process” in human activity; after all someone without a brain could hardly claim to “see,” “hear” or “think.” As Potter and Wetherell [8] warn, there is little profit in becoming embroiled in “..fruitless debates about the reality or non-reality of mental entities, which can easily end up in the kind of linguistic imperialism which denies all significance to cognitive processes.” The fundamental principle central to all discursive approaches emanating from Sacks’ original work is that the words people speak are not straightforwardly *reducible* to, or *representative* of, cognitive operations which mediate the “real world” and an inner representation of it. As such, rather than using the words that people say to deduct cognitive information, the focus for this paradigm is upon the intricate actions that those words accomplish in the social realms that people inhabit. Such actions include, but are by no means limited to, blaming, excusing, inspiring, confronting, explaining, avoiding, enrolling and excluding. When a coach requests that a player “pull their socks up,” we would not generally imagine that this represents an “inner” desire to see footwear corrections made. It is recognisable (to those with the right socio-cultural frame of reference) as a *motivation* token.

Similarly, when providing factual descriptions, it is rarely in a coach’s interest to simply present a perfectly “neutral” picture of “what happened” (assuming, for one moment, that this were even possible). Language is a vastly flexible tool, we can describe

any one situation, person or thought in a wide range of ways without ever being factually incorrect. As such, our descriptions are themselves *formulations*, versions of the things that can be shown to perform particular functions in particular contexts [9]. Any experienced coach will be fully conversant with the fact that the knowledge they hold, if it is to have the desired import in the business of coaching itself, needs to be reframed and reformulated in line with where it is being produced, for whom and to what ends; there is a necessary element, at the very least, of *rhetoric* involved [10]. The way a coach relays technique X to a novice athlete is unlikely to be reflective of the entirety of the coach's knowledge of the topic, but instead reflective of what he or she reasons that athlete will best understand, digest and learn from. It is also, one might reasonably expect, likely to be a rather different account of technique X to one the same coach might then present to a far more experienced athlete. The former may be extended but simplistic, on the assumption that the novice "audience" is not at all conversant with the materials. The latter, where it can be assumed that the athlete has already been taught the technique, may be truncated and lower on formal explanation, formulated more as a "reminder" than a "lesson." Neither is a transparent representation of the character and extent of the coach's knowledge of the technique itself. The particular character of any piece of knowledge as-it-is-communicated is, thus, contingent upon particular features of the (assumed) context in which it is *being* communicated². As David Silverman [3] writes, not only does Sacks' work (in this sense) stand in opposition to most contemporary academic treatments of language, it is also quite powerfully counter-intuitive.

"Ordinarily, if we think about it at all, we assume that what we say reflects our state of mind. However, what Sacks is showing us is that, in practice, we construct our talk with reference to how it will be heard. By saying what we do, positioned in a particular place, we thus make available to our hearer(s) a particular reading of what we mean."

² The same is true of résumés and journal papers.

In sum, a discursive psychology of coaching practice needs to recognise that “...to separate talk and action as psychologists commonly do (for example in distinctions such as attitudes vs. behaviour) is to set up a false dichotomy, and to overlook the ways in which talk achieves things in itself.” [9]. Rather than exclusively ask ourselves what incidences of talk between coaches and athletes might *represent*, we should seriously consider Sacks’ core postulates and, instead, regard them in the way that we regard other forms of action by asking, primarily: (a) “What does the talk do here?” and (b) “How does it do it?”

Coaching, discursive psychology and Sacks’ legacy

Since his premature death in 1974, Sacks’ work has proven profoundly influential in many realms of social science [3, 11, 12]. In its most direct form it has been the basis for the modern discipline of conversation analysis (henceforth CA), a highly technical methodology which has to date been applied in a wide range of domains, and particularly to “institutional” brands of talk (such as those immanent in judicial and medical interaction), including making some inroads in the study of talk in sport [13]. Like the ethnomethodology [14] by which Sacks himself was influenced, CA provides a strong and sustained focus on the unfolding of meaning in situated examples of action, with a view to ultimately describing “architecture of intersubjectivity” [15], the very structures of interaction. Studies in CA primarily address the tacit communicative competences which underpin the production of orderly conversational exchange, the practical kinds of interactional work to which utterances are put and the way that these utterances are designed with respect to the sequences of talk in which they occur. In short, CA explores in a fine-grained and stoically empirical manner the local procedures through which everyday life is lived and its meanings produced and reproduced by co-participants in interaction [6, 16-18]. For the most part, however, conversation analysts have

been less concerned with the issues of “mind” that are key to the concerns of coaching psychology, and the *construction* of psychological realities [19, 20] that this paper primarily addresses. There have been recent exceptions to this trend such as Paul Drew’s [21] work on confusion though, as Potter [19] notes, these do sometimes (and *contra* Sacks call to “...not worry if they’re thinking”) attempt to link interactional phenomena to cognitive states, rather than working to “...understanding putatively cognitive phenomena in interactional terms.”

Discursive psychology and sport psychology

Potter’s final mandate above, to maintain a systematic, non-cognitive approach to conventionally cognitive matters, is the foundational principle of contemporary discursive psychology (henceforth DP)³. Drawing heavily upon Sacks’ original work [5, 22], and upon many of the subsequent developments in CA, the approach found its first coherent articulation in Potter and Wetherell’s seminal *Discourse and Social Psychology* [8], which functions largely as a critique of the orthodox theories, methodologies and categories employed in cognitive social psychology. In line with Sacks, the authors explore words as actions, and accounts as active constructions, to show how the importance of variations in actual language use between accounts of phenomena have been largely overlooked in psychological studies. Rather than address accounts of “attitudes,” for example, as neutral representations of said attitudes, they argue that it is first necessary to address the pragmatic work that the accounts themselves do. People do, after all, have a tendency to espouse apparently contradictory attitudes in different contexts. Descriptions of “internal states” do not, thus, for Potter and Wetherell, give the analyst privileged access to the *being* of a person. Rather they should be treated as irreducibly *social* products employed to achieve specific interpersonal goals. By way of a methodological “manifesto,” the authors outline six key principles which have

³ Contra CDA.

obvious ramifications for the investigation of phenomena such as Arsène Wenger's claims to have "not seen" an event (above), and the study of talk in coaching practice in general:

1. language is used for a variety of functions and its use has a variety of consequences;
2. language is both constructed and constructive;
3. the same phenomenon can be described in a number of different ways;
4. there will, therefore, be considerable variation in accounts;
5. there is, as yet, no foolproof way to deal with this variation and to sift accounts which are 'literal' or 'accurate' from those which are 'rhetorical' or simply 'misguided' thereby escaping the problems variation raises for researchers with a 'realistic' view of language;
6. the constructive and variable ways in which language is used should themselves become a central topic of study. [8]

These core concerns are developed into a more detailed programmatic statement (the "Discursive Action Model") by Edwards and Potter [23], a general set of principles designed to "...orient the psychologist to important features of everyday reports and explanations." This is outlined below:

Action

1. The focus is upon action, not cognition.
2. Remembering and attribution become, operationally, reportings (and accounts, description, formulations, versions and so on) and the inferences that they make available.
3. Reportings are situated in activity sequences, such as those involving invitation refusals, blamings and defences.

Fact and Interest

4. There is a dilemma of stake or interest, which is often managed by doing attribution via reports.
5. Reports are often therefore constructed/displayed *as* factual by way of a variety of discursive techniques.
6. Reports are rhetorically organised to undermine alternatives.

Accountability

7. Reports attend to the agency and accountability in the reported events.

8. Reports attend to the accountability of the current speaker's action, including those done in reporting.
9. The latter two concerns are often related, such that 7 is deployed for 8, and 8 is deployed for 7.

Since these original interventions, DP has generated an extensive programme of empirical investigation into a wide range of traditional psychological concerns such as memory [24], attribution [25], emotion [26], decision-making [27] and identity [28], and has been also actively applied to the broader study of sporting phenomena with instructive results [29-32]. Its lack of headway in the study of coaching is, however, somewhat surprising given the transparently task-focused character of many naturally-occurring verbal activities in the domain. Team-talks and performance review meetings, for instance, are not simply (or even necessarily *mainly*) focused on the technical communication of neutral and factually correct information; rather they are exercises in the strategic deployment of *believable* detail with a view to making practical differences to the players and the game. As Ludwig Wittgenstein [33] asserted, we should not dwell on what speakers might have been thinking when they utter words when, in fact, *practice gives words their significance*. A half-time team-talk, it is fair to say, is largely tasked with the motivation of effective action in the second period of play. This may (depending on the specific circumstance) involve foregrounding or backgrounding specific aspects of what has happened so far, phrasing certain issues *as* positive or negative, making threats and promises or even wilfully lying. The functional point is not whether the claims made are propositionally "true" or "false," "accurate" or "inaccurate," but rather whether they are (a) credibly delivered, i.e. constructed in such a way as to be intelligible and believable given the assumed character of the audience, and (b) productive, i.e. they engender some mode of positive outcome. A putatively descriptive statement such as "we can still win this," for example, is almost entirely rhetorical in form as there are very few empirical circumstances in which, halfway through a game, it might not *possibly* be true. Thus, for the psychologist, claims of this order should not be considered

transparent (and falsifiable) statements of belief, but as social-psychological tools for the promotion of positive action.

With these issues in mind, we can finally turn to an issue in the psychology of coaching which bears great promise for discursive investigation.

DP and coaching: The issue of “expertise”

Within many of the contemporary structures of sport itself, the importance of any given individual gaining official modes of certification, the very totems of institutionally-defined expertise, has now become prerequisite to the practices of coaching, teaching and management in sporting life at all but the most casual of levels. For example, since 2003 it has been mandatory for all coaches wishing to take up a position in the English Premier League to hold the UEFA Pro License. This coaching qualification can only be attained following the completion of the UEFA “B” and “A” licenses and, in itself, requires around 240 hours of study over the course of a year, a residential study week at a UK University, plus numerous written examinations and assessed practical sessions.

Often drawing upon K. Anders Ericsson’s dominant “expert performance” approach [34-36], meanwhile, the contemporary corpus of psychological research into coaching expertise tends to reflect a set of broadly social-cognitive concerns, with specific studies routinely focusing on the conceptualisation and/or measurement of expertise itself [37], and/or influences upon, or obstacles to, the development of such expertise [38, 39]. It is the primary contention herein, however, that the dominance of social-cognitive approaches within the contemporary study of this expertise, and the attendant attempts to produce trans-situational models thereof, has led to a lack of focus on the interpersonal mechanisms through which the key phenomenon is actively, variably and credibly *performed* within concrete social practices. To neglect the manner in which “expert knowledge” is itself made

interpersonally available to others in such a way as to be *recognisably* expert leaves us with something of a “tree falling in the forest” dilemma. In short, it is one thing for me to accumulate vast reams of useful and specialised domain-specific (i.e. “expert”) knowledge. It is another entirely to impart it to a pertinent audience in such a way as to convey my own authority with respect to that knowledge, and to reinforce my authenticity as a credible expert.

In these terms, expertise is *only* really evident (and therefore possible to evaluate) in its practical, interpersonal performance; we are not as yet in a position where we can neurologically map the dimensions of specific bodies of knowledge “under the skull” [40]⁴. Moreover, effective interpersonal performance relies upon skills that are not an inevitable upshot of the acquisition of propositional, domain-specific knowledge itself. To fully demonstrate my mathematical expertise during an examination, for example, I need not only to acquire and understand the pertinent mathematical knowledge, but to be able to cope with the exam context itself, use the time effectively and so forth. Failure to do so may well result in outcomes which suggest to others that I am not *actually* good at maths at all. To be a successful soccer coach, meanwhile, I need to have extensive and flexible knowledge of tactics and strategies, for sure, but if I am unable to communicate this knowledge to the players in a manner that they can *themselves* understand, internalise and execute in practical circumstances, the knowledge itself comes to naught. Furthermore, my capacity to retain and apply extensive high-level tactical information will not, in and of itself, necessarily motivate the players, inspire them or win their trust.

The real-world impact of specialised knowledge – or indeed any knowledge – is always, therefore, to some extent contingent upon a broader set of practical and vividly *social* skills, not least those involved in linguistic communication [9, 14, 19], and there can be little dispute that the primary manner in which expert knowledge in coaching is *transferred* in

⁴ Even if we were, it is unlikely that this would be the prime arbiter of how people evaluate each other’s expertise in practical social life.

coaching is through the use of language, both spoken and written. Below, one method for verbally performing expertise is discussed from a discursive psychological perspective, with a particular view to highlighting how the character of authoritative knowledge as-produced is always indivisibly bound to the social context of its production.

“Doing” expertise in challenging coaching situations: Authenticity in autobiography

The findings briefly discussed below emerge from pilot investigations into the language of team-talks, utilising examples procured both from mediated documentary sources and direct field research in a variety of sports. Early findings indicate a range of highly nuanced and skilled interpersonal methods used by coaches in constituting their knowledge and, reflexively, themselves as authentically and authoritatively “expert.” The one addressed herein, it should be noted, recurrently occurs in contentious situations, most frequently those in which the coach is engaged in the business of explicitly challenging or criticising the performances or attitudes of the athlete(s), or vice versa.

In a study of accounts of subcultural affiliation, Widdecombe and Wooffitt [41] observe in great detail how speakers, in situations where they infer that own identity as a “proper” punk, goth etc. might be challenged, often go to great lengths to *select and foreground* highly specific autobiographical details that hearably speak to their own status as “the real deal,” as it were. This “authenticity in autobiography” [41] is also far from an uncommon form of talking in the discourse of soccer fandom. Supporters of successful clubs that are thought to attract large numbers of “fairweather fans,” such as Manchester United, will often load their accounts of “which team they support” with very specific details pertaining to duration of affiliation to the club, attendance at specific games, holding of season tickets, knowledge of club history and so forth. All of these, to a co-interlocutor with a common socio-cultural frame of reference, can hearably serve to differentiate the “true” fan

from the fairweather variety by explicitly drawing attention to quantities of time and effort invested. Moreover, the particular use of such detail is, in turn, indicative of the speaker having reasoned that there is a culturally-available “dubiousness” in making the claim to support such a team in the first place. Fans of rather less glamorous teams seldom account for their club affiliations in the same way. They do not “need” to do so, as they can generally assume that other parties will not in any way infer that an affiliation to, say, Leyton Orient, is borne of an *ad-hoc* desire to bask in the team’s extensive glories. In short, within the language of English football, a speaker can reason that the claim to support a team that never wins anything is a hearable mark of authentic fandom in and of itself. The exception to this broad rule is in cases of Leyton Orient fans speaking to *each other*, in which case the issue of questionable authenticity may once again become operationally salient. The character of self-description, in all cases, is demonstrably contingent upon practical reasoning pertaining to the character of the local interpersonal context [6, 20].

“Authenticity in autobiography” is also observable in a range of moments in real sporting team-talks. Interestingly, it is most commonly used by a coach when either advancing direct criticism, or when being challenged by one or more of their charges. By explicitly describing autobiographical materials in this way, coaches can be seen to:

1. Reinforce their own situational authenticity as the “knowledgeable party” in the particular interaction, and thereby the authority of their knowledge itself. This may variously involve:
2. The explicit invocation of such detail as (a) length of time spent as a coach (*amount of practical experience*), (b) qualifications obtained (*quality of theoretical knowledge*) and (c) previous record of success (*quality of practical experience*), and so forth.

Which of these is specially foregrounded is dependent upon:

3. The coach’s own reasoning regarding how their claims might be heard, what they infer differentiates them most clearly from the particular athlete(s) they are speaking

to and the knowledge that they can assume the athlete(s) hold(s) regarding their prior coaching careers.

- a. As such, for example, older coaches can potentially use all three forms of detail outlined in point 2 credibly, though will chiefly address (a) as *the* matter of primary importance where (b) or (c) could be inferably challenged by the athlete(s).
4. Because these self-descriptions do not occur in isolation, but are bound up in verbal activity sequences where a point of contention arises, they *function* as:
- a. Prospective warrants for making a criticism (implicitly “I am/know/have done X, you are/do/have not, and therefore I am qualified to tell you that you are wrong here.”) Or;
 - b. Retrospective rebuttals of criticism (implicitly “How can you contest my expertise when I am/know/have done X and you are/do/have not?”).

Consider, for example, extract 2 (below)⁵, taken from a “spirited” half-time team-talk delivered by a soccer coach to his amateur side. Something in the style of this utterance may well be familiar to many coaches and soccer players alike:

Extract 2: (PD6; Soccer, Amateur, UK, 2008)

1. Coach: I don't know what to say (.) I jus fuckin don't (.)that was
2. ahh? (.) I've been doing this for fuck kno:ws
3. how long? (.) twenty odd years and (.) I've seen a lot of shit
4. but I can honestly say (.5) .hh that's the laziest fucki:ng
5. effort ((continues))

⁵ Note that this extract is, and as are most data using CA and DP, transcribed using the conventions developed by Gail Jefferson [43], which are summarised at the end of this paper.

The coach here, as described in the broad model above, orients to the potentially contentious nature of making a “big claim” about the weakness of his team’s performance (lines 4 and 5) by alluding specifically to his *time served* as a coach (around twenty years) which is longer than some of the players, in this instance, had been alive and certainly longer than any of them had been seriously involved in soccer. In doing so, he both:

1. Attends to his own accountability [14] for making such a strong claim. He makes explicitly available that he is the longest-serving football person, and inferably therefore the person with the greatest authority *to* make such claims – in short, he insulates the criticism against possible challenge on the grounds of experience. He generates expertise *within* the claim. And concurrently:
2. Strengthens the claim itself (the laziest effort by anyone in twenty years is hearably lazier than the team’s laziest effort in, say, the last six months).

Whether he *thinks* the performance is the laziest he has seen in twenty years, is exaggerating or simply lying is not the issue here; rather, the language he uses is itself demonstrably contingent upon the business of making a harsh criticism of a particular group of players in a particular context, and ultimately geared towards producing a better performance in the second half.

It is of note that this use of “authenticity in autobiography” does not only arise in moments of criticism, but is also sometimes a feature of strong compliments. It is not uncommon for coaches to deploy similar types and levels of detail when describing, for example, “great performances.” This indicates that this broad strategy in the language of coaching is primarily a feature of making potentially *contestable* claims, be they positive or negative. By directly occasioning their own claims to expertise, in terms of duration, record etc., when paying a compliment, coaches attend to the possibility that their words might be

heard *as* an exaggeration, or a *mere* compliment. Once again, the authority of the knowledge and the authenticity of the speaker are concurrently and reflexively worked-up in the talk itself.

Conclusion

In sum, thus, what has been advanced here is a sort of manifesto for greater engagement with discursive psychology within the field of coaching. The point is to identify how things are done with words within complex and fluid social contexts. This does not involve quantification; after all, it would be shortsighted to ignore rare or *ad-hoc* incidences of innovative practice because they are statistically insignificant. Rather DP calls for us, as psychologists, to explore and describe the rich variety of ways in which these actions are accomplished – and coaching, it is fair to say, is primarily about action. This may be highly counter-intuitive for the many of us trained to seek something “under the skull” as an explicatory resource but, and as Wittgenstein [33] observed:

“The difficulty- I might say- is not that of finding a solution but rather of recognising as the solution something that looks as if it were only a preliminary to it...This is connected, I believe, with our wrongly expecting an explanation, whereas the solution of the difficulty is a description, if we give it the right place in our considerations. If we dwell upon it, and do not try to get beyond it.”

DP asks us not to further refine our existing models, but to challenge our assumptions regarding the very relationship between thought and action. It is an uncomfortable ask, chiefly because a discursive psychological approach to coaching does not facilitate prediction. As the great mathematician Benoit B. Mandelbrot argued in *The Fractal Geometry of Nature* [42], however, it is our expectations of precise scientific prediction that are in most cases

themselves at fault, as they draw our focus away from what *is* and encourage an alternative focus on our own idealised (and predictable) renderings thereof. A discursive psychology of coaching practice holds great promise for a greater understanding of the real, everyday business of being a coach in all of its complexity and messiness. Open debate on the issue is crucial; we should probably not, like Arsène, claim to have not *seen* it.

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