

IT'S TIME FOR A NEW CHAPTER A Discourse-Analytical Analysis of News Articles on the Retirement of Professional Athletes

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Abstract – For professional athletes, their retirement constitutes a life-changing event. It marks the ending of a chapter in their lives during which sports-related activities were omnipresent and dominant. Research on the retirement decision and its consequences is mainly conducted in the domain of (sports) psychology. Newspapers and news sites dedicate articles to the retirement of famous athletes: they describe their careers, their honours list, and their reasons for retiring. In this paper, we compare 50 articles from Belgian news media on athletes' retirements with obituaries, texts that are published when the ultimate life-changing event in a person's life occurs, with the aim of determining similarities and differences between both text types. To achieve that goal, we collected 50 retirement articles from Flemish media. We carried out a primarily qualitative analysis of their content and analysed the relevant language choices made by the authors. Both text types address the same topics and refrain from including negative aspects. In obituaries, metaphors are mostly introduced to circumvent sensitive topics. In retirement articles, they embellish the discourse. Both text types illustrate the happiness-sadness paradox.

Keywords: retirement; professional athletes; death discourse; metaphors; discourse analysis.

1. Background

The career of professional athletes is in most cases limited in time. During their career, their whole life is dominated by activities related to sports (training, competitions, diets, rest, physiotherapy, psychological support, travelling etc.). When they decide – for whatever reason – to retire, their lives change drastically. The preparations and consequences of their retirement have already been studied from different perspectives. In this paper, we present the results of an analysis of news articles published on the occasion of the retirement of Belgian professional athletes. Only athletes with a certain degree of fame receive media attention when they retire. While exploring the material, we noticed parallels with different types of death discourse, a discourse type we have extensively analysed (cfr. References). Our approach was to pinpoint similarities and differences with obituaries, using our previous research as basis for the comparison. Since that type of death

discourse is also published when a life-changing event occurs, we wondered if there are any parallels between both text types. We discuss the content of the texts and some relevant discursive aspects.

First, we refer to existing research on the topic of retirement. This section is limited, since most published research has been conducted within the domain of (sports) psychology. After a description of the research material and the methodology, we discuss and illustrate the content of the articles. We then turn our attention to the metaphorical language. In the discussion section, we juxtapose and compare the discourse of retirement articles and obituaries.

2. Literature

The retirement of professional athletes has been studied with different focuses. For example, Fernandez, Stephan and Fouquereau (2006) developed the Athletes' Retirement Decision Inventory, a questionnaire to determine the reasons why professional athletes retire. Cosh, Crabb and LeCouteur (2013) define three types of retirement: retirements related to age, to injury and to active choice. They also examine the psychological consequences of the different types of retirement. Another study focusing on the consequences is Alfermann, Stambulova and Zemaityte (2004). Good planning of the retirement has positive effects, while a strong athletic identity causes more problems during the adaptation to life after the sports career. Cecić Erpič, Wylleman and Zupančič (2004) describe how both athletic (e.g. voluntarism of the termination) and non-athletic (e.g. education) factors influence the quality of the termination process of a sports career.

Our search for discourse-analytical analyses of texts on the retirement of professional athletes yielded very few results. Although Cosh, Crabb and LeCouteur (2013) claim to employ a discursive psychological approach to articles in Australian print newspapers, their analysis is mainly a content analysis with attention to lexical choices. The lack of discourse-analytical studies is confirmed by the literature review of Park, Lavalley and Todd (2012), which does not include that kind of approaches. Their bibliography contains more than 150 references, none of which has been published in a discourse-oriented or linguistic journal. The vast majority is embedded in psychology.

A preliminary analysis of our research material revealed similarities with obituaries. The link is evident: death is the most definitive form of (saying) goodbye. Obituaries are a stable text type with a predictable content and format (Moses and Marelli 2004; Heynderickx and Dieltjens 2016). They are also considered reliable material to analyse how societies cope with

sensitive or difficult topics. There are for example numerous studies that describe how the explicit mention of death and its causes (e.g. cancer, suicide) are circumvented by using metaphors and euphemisms (e.g. Cheung and Ho 2004; Crespo Fernández 2006, 2011; Galal 2014; Heynderickx and Dieltjens 2016, 2021; Sexton 1997; Tay 2019). Heynderickx, Dieltjens and Oosterhof (2017) analyse metaphors in obituaries of professional athletes.

3. Methodology

By means of an extensive search using the Google search bar, we compiled a list of Belgian professional athletes who retired from professional sports during the last decade. We collected two articles from different media for each athlete, without taking into consideration their type of sport, age, gender or reason for retiring.

For the quantitative analysis and the collocational data, WordSmith 7 was used. The content analysis was conducted by a close reading of the texts, during which all relevant information was put in an Excel document. For the analysis of the metaphors, one researcher implemented the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007). In short, MIP is a tool to identify metaphorical expressions in written or spoken discourse. It consists of several steps: 1) read the text; 2) determine the lexical units; 3a) determine the contextual meaning of each lexical unit; 3b) determine if the lexical unit has a more basic meaning in other contexts; 3c) determine if the contextual meaning can be understood in comparison with the basic meaning; 4) if so, the lexical unit is metaphorical. The results of that analysis were discussed with a second researcher until consensus was reached.

4. Corpus description

We compiled a list of 25 retired Belgian athletes. In Flanders, they are considered strong athletes, which is confirmed by the frequent occurrence (46, 0.28% of the total word count) of compounds with 'top' (e.g., top sports, top athlete). For each athlete we collected two articles in newspapers (total: 50 articles). By including two articles from different sources for each athlete, we try to avoid a focus on the specific writing style of particular sports journalists.

There is an imbalance between male (19, 76%) and female athletes (6, 24%). A similar gender imbalance is present in the material of Cosh, Crabb and LeContour (2013): it consists of 27 articles on the retirement of five

female athletes and 223 articles on that of sixteen male athletes. In the research of Alfermann, Stambulova and Zemaityte (2004) the gender is more evenly balanced (130 male + 126 female), but the methodology section does not clarify if that was consciously guided during the participant selection. The research material that we compiled, consists of 16,246 words. The average length of an article is 324.92 words, with the longest one containing 1,172 words and the shortest one 86 words. In total thirteen sports are represented. Football and (on and off-road) cycling are best represented with five athletes each, which is not surprising since they are the most popular sports in Flanders.

5. Content analysis

We have analysed which topics are addressed in the research material. Table 1 shows how often each of those topics appears in the texts. On average, an article contains 5.72 of those elements. The highest number of topics in one article is 9, the lowest number is 3. Below the table we briefly discuss the topics that occur in more than half of the articles.

Topic	n (total: 50)
Sport	48
Age	48
Quote (from the retired athlete)	35
Reason	34
Honours list	33
Channel of communication (e.g. press release, Instagram post)	23
Future	22
Qualities of the athlete	21
Length of career	15
Farewell game / Last game	11
Testimonial (e.g. teammate, coach)	7
Nickname	7
Words of gratitude	5
Successor	3

Table 1
Reoccurring topics.

Unsurprisingly, almost all articles mention which sport the athlete practiced. The two articles without mention contain sufficient clues to determine the sport if the reader has some background knowledge. For example, one of the articles mentions the football teams for which a particular athlete played. The age of retirement is almost always included. It is added to the athlete's name

between brackets, or it is described with a single adjective (e.g., *dertigjarig* – thirty years old, cf. example (8) below), but is not commented upon. The only exception is a table tennis player who retired at the (in the context of sports unusually old) age of 49 after a career of almost 40 years. In 35 articles (70%) the retiring athlete is quoted. The content of the quotes varies. Some contain a look back (e.g., highlights (1) and disappointments (2)), others a look forward (e.g., plans for the future (3)).

- (1) Ik heb de Belgische driekleur gedragen en ik heb op het podium gestaan in mooie klassiekers zoals de Ronde van Vlaanderen en Milaan-Sanremo. (I have worn the Belgian tricolour and I have stood on the podium in beautiful classics such as the Tour of Flanders and Milan-San Remo.)
- (2) Het is jammer genoeg niet gelukt die andere droom te realiseren: wereldkampioen worden. (Unfortunately, I could not realise that other dream: to become world champion.)
- (3) Ik word bij mijn huidige club Spirou Charleroi sportief directeur. (I will become sporting director at my current team Spirou Charleroi.)

Some athletes reflect on their career and their retirement. Words of gratitude are integrated in the quotes (4).

- (4) Ik wil iedereen alvast bedanken voor alle steun de voorbije jaren, en zal dat opnieuw doen op het einde van dit jaar als het verhaal écht gedaan is. (I would like to thank everyone for their support over the years and will do so again at the end of this year when the story is really finished.)

There are five athletes for whom neither of the articles indicates the reason for their goodbye. The most frequently mentioned reason is physical discomfort (e.g., injuries, cardiac problem, (5)), but also mental fatigue is suggested (6). Some athletes combine the physical and the mental aspect (7).

- (5) Artrose in zijn heupen noopt Dekelver tot pensioen (Arthritis in his hips forces Dekelver to retire)
- (6) ik kan me moeilijk motiveren om nog af te zien (I find it difficult to motivate myself to keep suffering)
- (7) maar koersen en trainen met pijn, dag in dag uit, is echt zwaar, zowel fysiek als mentaal. (But racing and training with pain, day after day, is really hard, both physically and mentally.)

Another recurrent reason can be labelled 'other priorities' (e.g., a busy kinesiotherapy practice, a successful fashion label, (8)). Single-mention reasons are age, lack of contract, the postponement of the Olympic Games in

Tokyo and the absence of training facilities because of the COVID-19 lockdown (9).

- (8) De 33-jarige atlete legt zich nu volledig toe op haar modelabel. (The 33-year-old athlete is now fully dedicating herself to her fashion label.)
- (9) “Een topsporter moet consequent kunnen trainen”, zei Van Tichelt vrijdag op een persconferentie. “Door corona is dat heel moeilijk. (...)” (“A top athlete must be able to train consistently,” Van Tichelt said at a press conference on Friday. “Because of corona, that is very difficult. (...)”)

In one article the complete honours list of the athlete is included. Other articles restrict the list to awards and major titles or victories (10).

- (10) Zijn hoogtepunt was de zege op het WK Ironman in Hawai in 2013. Hij was ook vijf keer de beste in Nice. (His highlight was his victory at the 2013 Ironman World Championships in Hawaii. He also was five times the winner in Nice.)

As was to be expected, the vast majority of the content is positive. The negative information has to do with injuries, missed opportunities and disappointments such as narrowly missing an Olympic medal (11). Some of the negative information is immediately countered by a more positive element (12). In some cases, a negative characteristic, which in the context of a professional sports career could be considered a positive one, is attributed to the athlete, like in the quote of a former teammate in example (13).

- (11) In 2016 ging Van Acker in Rio de Janeiro met de nodige ambitie van start, maar viel ze, verzwakt door de nasleep van een infectie, net naast het podium. Een teleurstelling die toen heel hard aankwam bij de zeilster. (In Rio de Janeiro in 2016, Van Acker started with ambition, but, weakened by the aftermath of an infection, she fell just short of the podium. A disappointment that hit the sailor very hard at the time.)
- (12) Het afscheid van Timmers werd achtervolgd door coronazorgen, maar in Boedapest kon hij de voorbije weken nog deelnemen aan een internationale competitie. (Timmers' goodbye was haunted by corona worries, but he was still able to participate in an international competition in Budapest in recent weeks.)
- (13) Je was een echte klootzak om tegen te spelen. Een echt competitiebeest. Respect! Proficiat met je carrière. (You were a real asshole to play against. A real competition beast. Respect! Congratulations on your career.)

6. Metaphor analysis

The material contains 124 different metaphors, which appear in total 207 times. Table 2 shows the five most frequently used metaphors. The third one ('a signboard for', an ambassador for¹) occurs in the texts of one specific athlete about whom different people (coach, minister of sports, etc.) state that she was an ambassador for sailing in Belgium. There are 85 metaphors with a single occurrence.

Metaphor	Frequency
<i>een punt zetten achter</i> (to put a stop to)	23
<i>een nieuw/ander hoofdstuk</i> (a new/different chapter)	6
<i>een uithangbord voor</i> ('a signboard for', an ambassador for)	6
<i>aan de haak hangen</i> ('to hang on a hook', to shelve)	4
<i>knallen/knaller</i> (bang)	4
<i>op zijn naam zetten/schrijven</i> (to put to his name)	4

Table 2
Most frequently occurring metaphors.

The most frequently used metaphor is linked to the reason why the articles were published. The material contains other metaphors that express the idea of ending something, in this case a career: *aan de haak hangen* ('to hang on a hook', to shelve), *aan de wilgen hangen* ('to hang on the willows', to lay down), *de cirkel is rond* (come full circle), *afzwaaien* ('to flag off', to sign off), *kappen met* (to cut with), *er een streep onder trekken* (to draw a line under it) and *de handdoek gooien* (to throw in the towel). Although there is a rich variety of metaphors, the concept of saying goodbye to or ending a career is not avoided. In total, the word *afscheid* (goodbye) occurs 82 times in the material (0.50% of the total word count). *Afscheid* as separate word is the second most frequent content word in the research material (33rd position in the frequency table, 66 occurrences, 0.41% of the total word count). There is also one compound with *afscheid* as its right-hand part and nine compounds (17 occurrences) with *afscheid* as their left-hand part. There are also other words that refer to the end of something. Table 3 gives an overview of those words with their frequencies in the material. It also indicates how often these words are related to the retirement. For example, in example (14) *laatste* (final, last) is related to the retirement, in (15) it is not.

¹ We add a literal translation between inverted commas if the idiomatic translation in English does not illustrate what we describe.

- (14) Zijn laatste wedstrijd was de Ironman van Ierland. (His last race was the Ironman of Ireland.)
- (15) Die elke match speelde alsof het zijn laatste was. (Who played every match as if it was his last.)

Word	Occurrences	Related to retirement
afscheid (farewell) + compounds	84	84
laatst(e) (last, final) + variants	52	33
stop(pen) (stop) + variants	49	47
einde (end) + variants	27	14
(af)sluiten (close)+ variants	14	11
pensioen (retirement) + compounds	11	11
voor bekeken houden (to consider something sorted)	8	7
gedaan (finished, over)	6	1
TOTAL		208 (1.28% of the total word count)

Table 3
Words expressing a career ending.

Of the 124 metaphors in the material, fourteen (11.29%) have their source domain in sports. Example (16) contains a metaphor from boxing, example (17) one from wrestling.

- (16) De aanvaller van Lommel United sukkel al geruime tijd met kleine kwaaltjes en gooit nu de handdoek in de ring. (The Lommel United striker has been struggling with minor injuries for quite some time and is now throwing in the towel.)
- (17) De voorbije drie jaar worstelde ze met eetstoornissen (boulimie) en veel hardnekkige blessures. (For the past three years, she has been wrestling with eating disorders (bulimia) and many persistent injuries.)

There are only two of those sports metaphors related to the sport practiced by the athlete ((18), (19)). In both cases, it is in an article about cyclists.

- (18) Het is echt een onvergetelijke rit geweest. (It has really been an unforgettable stage.)
- (19) Kevin Pauwels is in de laatste rechte lijn van zijn loopbaan beland. (Kevin Pauwels has entered the final straight of his career.)

Although it is often claimed that metaphors are used to avoid a direct description of negative concepts, the majority of the metaphors in our material (59/124, 47.58%) has a positive tone (example (20)). There are 34 neutral ones (27.42%, (21)) and 31 negative ones (25.00%, (22)).

- (20) Het is tijd voor een nieuw hoofdstuk. (It's time for a new chapter.)
- (21) was hij twee seizoenen lang een onbetwiste titularis in het hart van de verdediging (he was for two seasons an undisputed key player in the heart of the defence)
- (22) Pauwels was eerder dit jaar geveld door een virale infectie. (Pauwels was felled by a viral infection earlier this year.)

7. Discussion and Conclusions

Our hypothesis after our preliminary research was confirmed: there are undeniable similarities between retirement articles and obituaries. The first similarity is the imbalance between males and females. Male obituaries are dominant in the vast majority of studies (for an overview: cf. Heynderickx and Dieltjens 2016). In Heynderickx, Dieltjens and Oosterhof (2017), which discusses obituaries of professional athletes, the ratio between male and female deceased is 96% vs. 4%, which is an even more striking imbalance than in our current research material (76% vs. 24%).

The choice of topics is comparable in both text types. In Table 4, we put the content of the retirement texts next to that of obituaries, by comparing them to the basic content description in Moses and Marelli (2004) and the more elaborated one in Heynderickx and Dieltjens (2016). Of the fourteen topics pinpointed in the retirement articles, only four are absent in obituaries. The absence of a channel of communication is self-evident, since people do not announce their own death unless they choose euthanasia. The other three missing topics are less frequent topics in obituaries. Words of gratitude do appear in obituaries, but are introduced to thank the deceased, while in retirement articles it is the athlete who thanks family, coaches, sponsors and fans. The authors of both retirement articles and obituaries avoid negative content. When negative elements are included, they are countered with a positive element, as if the Latin proverb 'de mortuis nil nisi bonum dicendum' (speak no ill of the dead) seems also applicable to retiring athletes.

Retirement articles	Moses and Marelli (2004)	Heynderickx and Dieltjens (2016)
sport		function, job title
age	age	age
quote		quote from the deceased
reason	cause of death	cause
honours list	life and career	career information
channel of communication		
future		living on in the memory of others
qualities		qualities
duration of career	life and career	career information
farewell game / last game	funeral announcement	funeral information
testimonial		quotes from colleagues
nickname		
words of gratitude		
successor		

Table 4
Topic comparison.

In both text types, metaphors are used, but their functions differ. In obituaries the metaphors are often introduced to circumvent the direct mentioning of negative elements. In retirement articles, however, the majority of the metaphors has a positive meaning. Another difference has to do with the classification of the metaphors. Crespo Fernández (2011) described six traditional death metaphors that occur regularly in death discourse. Heynderickx and Dieltjens (2016) observed the same metaphors in their material but added that non-traditional obituaries also contain more original and creative metaphors. The metaphors in the retirement texts are harder to classify than those in obituaries, and there are hardly any original metaphors. On the contrary, quite a number of them are metaphors that are well-established in everyday language use (e.g., a new chapter, to get the green light/go-ahead, to be at peace with) and can be considered to be clichéd expressions in Dutch. Only 11.29% of the metaphors in the retirement articles have sports as their source domain. Heynderickx, Dieltjens and Oosterhof (2017, p. 10) came to a similar conclusion: “The presence of sports-related metaphors is less prominent than expected”. They observed two types of sports-related metaphors (i.e. linked to combat sports and linked to a sporting event), both of which are present in the current research material (e.g. to wrestle with, to take the plunge). In brief, journalists of both retirement articles and obituaries seem to introduce metaphors to embellish their texts, but do not look for inspiration in the activities of the people they write about.

That conclusion is confirmed by a similar analysis of obituaries of politicians, which found only one politically inspired metaphor (Heynderickx and Dieltjens 2021).

The fact that there are many studies discussing the negative consequences of a retirement (e.g., depression, identity crisis, substance abuse, decreased self-confidence, and eating disorders (Wylleman, Alfermann and Lavallee 2004)) and coping mechanisms to deal with those consequences (e.g. psychological training programs for athletes approaching retirement or recently retired (Alfermann, Stambulova and Zemaityte 2004)), reveals that the termination of a sports career is not always a success story. Hatamleh (2013) gives the following statistics for Jordanian athletes:

The majority of athletes (59.62%) were unsatisfied with their decision of retirement, while (40.38%) were satisfied with their decision. The majority estimated their level of satisfaction as low (82.69%), (11.54%) as high and (5.77%) as moderate. (Hatamleh 2013, p. 347)

Although the retirement is obviously a sad occasion for athletes, their entourage and their fans, comparable to the demise of someone, it is not presented in that way. The retiring athletes are being applauded, their accomplishments are put in the spotlight, the negative aspects of their career are ignored. Retirement articles are subject to what Heynderickx and Dieltjens (2016) in their analysis of obituaries in staff magazines label the happiness-sadness paradox: sad events are paradoxically portrayed with positive content and language (e.g. the use of positive nouns and adjectives, of hyperbolic language, of extreme case formulations).

Although the research material is limited in size, this study reveals that retirement articles share characteristics with death discourse. A larger corpus would allow for more quantitative conclusions.

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