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# Watching the Beautiful Game Through a Semiotic Lens

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## Abstract

This document is an attempt at applying the knowledge learned this semester and apply them to an interesting field. A minimum of 30 semiotic terms had to appear from our Glossary assignment and all 10 references from the Bibliography assignment

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## Introduction

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This paper grants me the possibility to discuss the world's most popular sports game, soccer, with a semiotic perspective on the topic. This paper will be composed of ten sections in total, the first and last paragraphs will be easing the reader into and out of the paper; the other eight paragraphs will be talking about relevant parts of the game using semiotic terms to help develop a better understanding of the game semiotically

The second section of this paper, titled "The Stories Behind the Badges", will go over how a club's logo comes about and discuss its importance [[7]]. It will discuss how these badges, according to postmodernism (39), reflect the team's national culture and will discuss the logos as a sign (51) of the team they represent. The fact that these badges are composed of icons (20), indexes (23), and symbols (58) will be touched upon as well. The connotation (6) and denotation (9) of example badges will be addressed.

The third section of this paper, titled "Boots: Players Expressions on the Pitch", will discuss the importance of the soccer cleat, football boot, and how it is the most common variance between each player, with each player making a paradigmatic (35) choice of boot. After describing the importance of the marketing behind the boots will be addressed in terms of the grammar (18) used in the marketing and the poetic function of communication (38) is used to make memorable phrases to sell more boots. [[6]] [[2]]

The fourth section of this paper, titled "The Cultural Importance on the Game", will be used to address the countries and the impact they have on the game, in regards to playing style and fan support [[3]] [[5]]. The idea of semiospheres (48) having a profound impact on a country's playing style will be expanded along with the challenges that coincide with this game spanning across many countries and continents often with players playing together and not sharing a common language; a specific case will be discussed when countries with the same language (26) have the possibility of not understanding each other due to accents (36) being too distinct between the sets of players.

The fifth section of this paper, titled "Managers: The Tactician, Leader, and Organizer", will flow from the previous paragraph touching upon how cultures affect the manager's playing style and decision making [[8]]. Included will be an explanation of the code (2) that they produce for the team and an image schema (21) used to help explain the code to the team when language barriers may be in place. Conceptual metaphors (4) are used in some terminology in soccer, and these prevail through language barriers.

In the sixth section of this paper, titled "Officiating a Match", the job of the referee will be handled, as well as the role they play. Referees have many codes to enforce during a match and have many predefined haptics (15) and gestures (16) they perform. [[1]] The ways officials use gesticulates (17) to aid with multi language interpretations (22), the players, will be touched upon as well; the idea of using these to not require the metalingual function of communication (27) will be presented here. The officiating code the referees follow about the use of the emotive function of communication (13) and proxemics (42) towards them will be explained.

The seventh section of this paper, titled "The Nerve Racking Conclusion to a Game" will explain to the reader what penalty kicks are and what the specific circumstances that they need to be used are. The stakes and mind games played during these events will be expanded upon and the goalkeeper's keen eye for certain gestures and knowledge of oculosics (32) is important in impacting the outcome will be explained with usage of "The Power of Nonverbal behavior" [[9]]. The syntagmatic (62) and paradigmatic (35) selection of the players to take the penalty kicks during a 'shootout' will be explained here.

The eighth section of this paper, titled "The Viewer's Experience", will explain why the game is so entertaining. It will explain the odd hyperreality (19) that matches occur in. The feelings and interpretations of firstness (14), secondness (46), and thirdness (64) are experienced when a goal is scored and the final whistle is blown. [[5]] The feeling and reason of passing on stories of soccer games as myths to people is a vital part of the experience of being a fan will be the highlight of this part.

The ninth section of this paper, the conclusion, will neatly wrap up any outlying thoughts and will summarize semiotics points brought up about soccer in this paper.

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## The Stories Behind the Badges

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Badges are the representamin for everything a club encapsulates: the stadium, fans, players, and much more. The way the professional club's names work in most of Europe is that the name of the city is the name of the team; this is generally the case, however, there are exceptions commonly where there are many teams from the same city (Liverpool and Everton are teams both from the city of Liverpool). The badge is commonly found on the top left side of the jersey and is the sign [[51]] of the club. These badges are worn with respect and when a player scores many of them will hold the badge on their shirt and kiss it.

These teams the badges represent have a history with the town they're from and the badges often reflect this. Liverpool is a popular city and soccer team located in the northern part of England, this city's main purpose was that it was a popular port because it is located on the coast. On the Liverpool badge, there is an image of the "Liver Bird", a fictional bird part of local folklore. This bird on the badge is an example of an icon [[20]], as it directly reflects the thing it is referring to and has been heavily simplified. The badge has been and been modernized since its inception, however, during its original iteration, it had two mythical creatures flanking each side of the iconic bird, the Greek god Triton, and the Roman God Neptune, which are both ancient signs representing some aspect of the sea.

Further deconstruction of fellow logos uncovers other reasons and types of signs discovered inside the badges. A breakdown of the largest clubs has been organized by Ilias Michailidisa, which sorts club badges into different groups based on what is present in the badge. For instance, 84% of badges contain iconic signs somewhere in the badge. The icons are commonly things found in nature, certain animals, or plants. However, 14% of signs contain some symbols [[58]], Barcelona's badge is quite meta as the badge's main feature is the pattern found on the jersey, this fact can't be discovered by just observing the badges, the arbitrary relationship between the two must be learned resulting in this being a symbolic badge. National team's badges are commonly just the flags of the country they are playing for and these flags are symbolic as well with no direct way to relate the flag to the country present. (7) There are also badges with indexical [[23]] properties, PSV a club situated in the Netherlands, is infamous for having very windy conditions at their home stadium as they are situated near the sea. This club represents the strong winds not by drawing the wind, but rather by having the badge appear like it's blowing in the wind, a very unique and indexical way of having a staple feature of the club appear on the badge.

These badges are the easiest ways of representing a club with the least confusion, especially due to the name of these clubs just being city names. The Manchester United badge, Liverpool's biggest rivals, is just a devil on a crest with soccer balls surrounding it; this is a basic, denotative [[9]] description of the sign. When most soccer fans see that badge they think of the great matches played between their teams, they remember the goals scored, the players from the team. This is why club badges are so important, the

connotative [[6]] meanings surrounding them are so strong that just looking at a badge floods the mind with great memories.

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## **Boots: Players Expressions on the Pitch**

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Football boots, known here in the United States as soccer cleats, are the only real variance between what the different players are wearing: due to this fact players make a large deal when choosing which pair to wear. Players are left with a nonverbal decision when selecting a pair of boots to wear, commonly players pick a pair that matches the color code [[2]] of the jersey, for example, red boots when they are wearing a red-based uniform. Only some players do this, more commonly nowadays bright and flashier colors are being selected by famous players to stand out. Diachronically [[11]] looking at the subject of boots as a whole there is a shift away from muted colors towards these flashy designs.

These flashy designs parallel the flashy marketing terms used to describe the boots. Companies like Nike, Adidas, and Puma have multimillion-dollar marketing campaigns and have come up with great phrases to sell more boots. “Write the Future” and “The Legend lasts Forever” and two slogans these companies have churned out which encapsulate the poetic function of language [[38]]. Advertising jingles commonly use poetic language to invoke a connotative response in the customers and entice them into buying the pair of boots so they can do whatever the slogan is saying they can achieve. (6)

Marketing campaigns are often a picture of a famous player with some text and the product they are trying to sell. Wayan Restu highlights many of the interesting grammatical choices produced, “More Power, More Accuracy” being an interesting use of grammar [[18]], where instead of using a proper sentence to market a boot, the language is used improperly to list the attributes of wearing the boots. He refers to the color code [[2]] as well saying that starkly different colors are chosen to stand out more. The position of the player and words are strategically chosen to help convey the narrative of the event happening in the ad; a certain story attempted to be told in one of the ads is that of taking a penalty kick in the dying moments of a world cup. (2)

After all the marketing, brands, and designs players are left with a choice of what boot to wear. The players have a paradigmatic [[35]] decision to make between all the similar boots. All players must wear a certain type of shoe, cleats, but within the field of cleats, there is a range of options to choose from resulting in the decision being paradigmatic [[35]]. The decision of the players is based on their own personal signifying order [[50]] and how comfortable the boot is for them to wear.

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## The Cultural Importance on the Game

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Taking a step back and pondering the question of why it's called soccer instead of football like the rest of the world results in interesting discoveries. The different semiosphere in the United States resulted in the change of the parole [[36]] used for the sign that represents the game of Football. This happened because of a variant of Rugby taking off in America before what is now known as Soccer did. Americans were forced to adopt the secondary term used in England for the game, Soccer, to aid in the interpretants [[22]] hearing the word immediately knowing what sport is being talked about, rather than them being confused and requiring more clarification defeating the point of a linguistic sign [[53]].

There are two distinct ways to observe the game. The most common way of researching the game is by observing it synchronically [[60]], observing and contrasting the tactics of the game at a certain period, the most interesting period is definitely the current day. There are distinct differences in the different time periods the game was played with ways of summarizing them, for example, the 40s and the 50s was a very defensive era for the game, this was when not a lot of high scoring games were played and games were won commonly by just one goal. People also take a diachronic [[11]] approach to soccer, the most interesting aspect of soccer is to approach the rules diachronically [[11]] and see how they have developed over time. Offside, a rule in soccer where an attacking player can't stand behind the furthest back defending player was added in the 1880s, these additions lead to drastic changes in how the game is played.

The terminology of soccer and football being different is the only cultural difference that occurs in the most popular sports game in the world. This difference adds interesting aspects to the game as a result of it being played all around the world. The game develops wildly different in different parts of the world. The game develops and evolves differently based on the biosphere [[1]] it grows up in and this biosphere can often reflect the culture of the people of that area. The fact that different cultures have an impact on the style of play of soccer is what makes large international tournaments quite interesting as the opposing and most efficient playstyles are what commonly make it to the finals of the events. (5)

The biospheres [[1]] that the game develops in leads to distinct changes in the game, Germany prefers to sit back and start to press when it is later on in the game. (3) Another change appears in South America where there is higher importance culturally on having better foot skills, being better technically as an individual; compared to Europe when the sum of the team's parts is deemed more important. These differences are opposed at the World Cup perfectly, just like good and evil is commonly opposed in storytelling, defensive and attacking styles, or better individuals and better team play are just a few of the oppositions in the style that occur at the tournament. (10)

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## Managers: The Tactician, Leader, and Organizer

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One of the easiest ways for different cultural styles of playing the sport occurs when managers merge their home country's style with a bit of flair from the different country they are now managing in. An easy example to highlight of this occurring famously is in the English Premier League, as there are many wonderful managers from around the world working there currently. Jurgen Klopp and Pep Guardiola are two excellent tacticians that spring to mind when discussing this concept. Klopp, of German descent, moved to England a few years ago and is now coaching Liverpool. He has developed a certain pressing code [[2]] for his teams which he adapted from Germany. **Gegenpressing**, the name of the special code developed and termed by many famous German managers, instructs players to play very pushed up the field and have players rush the other team when the ball is lost. This code [[2]] reflects German football styles as well as they often never stray from the code and stay very organized throughout the match. (8) Pep Guardiola, another very distinguished manager, has a different code he employs with his teams which mirrors Spanish playing styles. **Tiki-Taka**, which roughly translates to touch-touch, is a conative use of language [[4]] instructing players to take one touch and they pass the ball to a teammate, this results in a very up tempo speed and with the team setting the pace of the match. (8)

Managers are the brains of the teams and it is imperative they convey the tactics that they have in their mind clearly and understandable to all the players on the team. Sometimes these concepts are very layered on top of other existing ideas so image schema [[21]] is extremely useful when explaining ideas, especially when a common language doesn't exist or is limited at best. Pep Guardiola attempts to have his team form **triangles** around opposing players, this is vital as it affords teammates a pass to either side of their opponents. **"Keeping a high line"**, is an example of tactical image schema [[21]] used to help encapsulate the ideas it's attempting to convey perfectly. The premise behind this is that the defending player should all stay in an organized perfectly straight "line" forcing the other team to play deeper in their own half, due to the offsides rule.

When teams are discussing how the game went at half time and at full time there are many unique phrases used to describe certain events during the game. For instance, a manager might say that "That shot should have been right on target." being an example of a metaphor; they also steal terms from other sports as well, like stating that a player on the bench is like "an ace up their sleeve" or saying the "other team is on the ropes"; these metaphors are stolen from poker and boxing, respectively. At halftime a manager might mention how "This game is a journey. ", a conceptual metaphor [[4]] meaning that the game is taking place over a long time and there will be obstacles in the way they have to overcome.

Most of the time throughout a match manager will sit in the 'dugout' and observe their team, make notes for half time, and discuss with their assistant manager. The managers are offered a small box on the side of the pitch they are allowed to stand in if they need a closer look or get closer to the field. Managers, during certain contexts [[7]], will enter this box and make adjustments. These certain contexts are

commonly when their team strays from the tactical codes developed, their team is playing poorly or a play of theirs is fouled and the referee makes a poor decision.

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## Officiating the Match

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Touching on who can make the poor decisions, the referee is the person who enforces the rules during a sports match; specifically in soccer, there are usually four of them, one main ref on the field, two on either side, and one last one in between the coaches on the sideline. A specific code [[2]] that is most difficult for people to understand is the offside code, which outlines the relationship between defending players and attacking players in relation to where they are allowed to stand on the field. The rule states that the furthest forward attacking player cannot be behind the furthest back defensive player. These referees have many different semiotic tools they can employ to aid with their task of ensuring a properly ruled match.

During the start of the match, the referee calls the two opposing captains of each team, the designated leaders of each team, to the center circle to perform a few pre-match rituals. One of these actions is a handshake between all three of them and giving the other team a copy of their team's badge, commonly on a small flag. The context of touch behind the handshake has hybrid meanings, it is 'ritualistic' as it has been occurring for centuries now, and also 'controlling' to let the other two participants know that if there is a problem with any member of the group they are representing they are the ones who should be addressed and confronted. Another haptics [[15]] occurs, commonly in lower leagues or amateur levels, that ref oversees is both teams walk past each other and fistbump their opponents, which essentially is just a physical version of a greeting.

In the highest level of soccer referees, players and managers may all speak a different language so trying to convey certain 'calls' could be very difficult and tedious. This is the reason there are a multitude of gestures [[16]] that the referees can perform to convey their message easier. For instance, if the aforementioned code of offsides is violated then the side referees will raise their flags and then point across the field, when this is occurring the main official will raise his hand up and blow his whistle. (1) These gestures [[16]] are very important because it stop players from needing to use the metalingual function of language [[27]] and ask referees what certain things they just said meant because of the language barrier. A gesticulant a referee may use occurs when a free-kick is taking place. The defending team may 'build a wall', placing players in front of the freekick to decrease the angle on goal. The players in the wall have to be a certain distance away and the referee can say something like "Back up" and point to a certain player to have the player in question understand who he is referring to without saying his name or number.

There are certain rules all players of the game must follow for the entire duration of the match. There are many outline rules that define how and what players can interact with the referee. Certain outbursts while using the emotive function of communication [[13]] may result in a card being given to the player; this is all dependent on how loud and vulgar their expressions were. There are proxemic [[42]] rules regarding

what player can come up to the ref and start talking to them; the only players allowed to do that are the captains and even when this happens they should stand a few feet back and give the referee enough space. No other play on the field should come up to the referee, especially not when a conflict arises and tensions are high, as this will most definitely result in a card being produced.

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## **The Nerve Racking Conclusion to a Match**

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Penalties can occur under two different instances. The first and most common occurrence of a penalty kick results when a player is fouled in the 'box', the larger of the two boxes in front of the goals, and the referee blows his whistle and points to the 'spot', the dot in the box. A player then gets to kick the ball from the penalty, spot one on one, at the goalkeeper. The second way this can occur is when the game is still tied after 120 minutes of play, then the teams will each send five players each to take a penalty. Penalty kicks are commonly the most important and stressful things that can occur during a match, mostly on the player taking the penalty because they are the ones who are 'supposed' to score. For the two people involved with the penalty kick, the shooter and the goalkeeper, the whole world around them is irrelevant and they are both studying each other trying to find out which way they are going to either dive or shoot the ball.

The first things the players will look at to give themselves a clue to what is about to happen can be seen by looking at each other's body language. The body language of the kicker can tell the goalkeeper a lot of information on where they are going to put the ball, for instance, a right-footed player running up to the ball from the left side will more commonly put it to the left side of the net, from the perspective of the kicker. Another thing of importance is how confident the players appear. A kinesics [[25]] study was performed on players who take penalties based on which player appeared more confident and seeing the outcome of this, (9) and the results from this study determined that if the opposing player appears more confident than themselves they will perform worse than their average.

A kicker's eyes can tell a whole story to a goalkeeper; this fact is why goalkeepers stare down their opponent when they are getting ready to take the kick. All players need to look at the goal at least once to orientate themselves and see where the net is. The better players don't look at the actual spot they are going to kick the ball towards, however, looking too obviously to the wrong spot will signal to the goalkeeper that they are pretending and that the player is going to go to the other side of the goal. Due to this fact people profound in oculesics [[32]] will teach goalkeepers to look for certain clues, like checking for how long the player looks at a certain spot, the longer the glance the less likely they are going to go to that side.

When the game ends tied and the two teams must send 5 people each forward, the manager is left with a few large decisions to make which if messed up will result in the last two hours being meaningless and possibly getting their team knocked out of the tournament. The manager must make two decisions: a paradigmatic choice and a syntagmatic choice. The paradigmatic [[35]] choice is that of finding out which five of his eleven to pick from will step up to take a kick, normally the five will volunteer themselves as



some people like the pressure. The second more tactical, syntagmatic [[62]] choice is determining the order of the players. There is a lot that goes into the choice; the first player sets the mood so a miss would really hurt the team, but the player going last might lose or win the game so that has the most pressure.

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## The Viewer's Experience

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Soccer is the most-watched sport around the world with the world cup final being the most-watched sporting event every time it occurs. People feel so many emotions during a match of soccer, great plays, missed chances, bad fouls, and much more; however, nothing can replace the feeling of your favorite team scoring a goal in a big match. The firstness [[14]] of this happening is just the sheer joy and excitement that you feel in the immediate moments after the goal is scored. The secondness [[46]] that occurs is the context that result means in relation to the game, pulling ahead in the game, starting the comeback or tying the game up. After these two previous feelings subside then people start looking at the larger picture, where this goal puts them in the standing or in the tournament, this thinking is thirdness [[64]]. These feelings and thoughts around scoring goals are definitely a large part of the many reasons the sport is so popular.

When people watch soccer matches people often forget that these people are real and have lives outside of the sport and that they are just doing their job. Soccer matches occur in a weird hyperreality where for about an hour the outside world can almost feel irrelevant and the only thing that matters is what is on the field. This hyperreality [[19]] can lead to people idolizing the players so much and then getting caught off guard when these people are bad people or just rude off the pitch. This fact is why so many people are startled and often deny anytime a player gets in trouble with law enforcement; just because people watch their favorite players week in, week out they feel like they personally know them.

Everybody has a story of their favorite moment that they watched live on television. These moments are the ideas many of us played in our heads growing up, playing in a world cup final and scoring the game-winning penalty kick. Those myths [[29]] that we made up as a kick are now being realized by these athletes and even if it's not us doing it, it's still amazing to watch happen, especially if it's happening for a player or team you support.

The way soccer keeps its fans so interested in almost all of its games is by having stakes and importance in almost every game. The main way this is accomplished in the league is by having a thing called relegation. Relegation happens to the worst 3 teams at the end of the league's season, they get put into the lower division and the best three teams come up the next season. There are also tournaments that the teams get placed into based on their standings in the table. This makes none of the league matches boring because teams are always fighting for something, be it survival, promotion, or winning the whole thing. This appears to be a postmodern [[39]] effect on the sport; sports are mirrors of our society, and the fact that almost every game has been played for something is definitely parallel, that nothing can be meaningless, everything we do must have a purpose. (4)

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## Conclusion

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In this paper, I attempted to look at the most popular game in the world not as just a fan watching some of my favorite players play, but apply the knowledge I gained in the field of semiotics to identify and discover some underlying semiotic principles and highlight the profound effects it has on the game so many of us love. Listed below are some of the relevant semiotic that were addressed in this paper:

- The **haptic**, **gestures**, **gesticulates** and **proxemics** that pertain to the referee, and by association the other players.
- The **denotation** and **connotations** that are inherently associated with all clubs based on many aspects, commonly their badge.
- Many different functions of language, including **poetic**, **metalingual**, **conative** and **emotive** and their use and relevance to soccer.
- The semiotic concept of **paradigmatic** and **syntagmatic** and how this concept is prevalent in winning some of the sport's largest games
- The **firstness**, **secondness**, and **thirdness** people experience watching the game
- The **indexes**, **icons**, and **symbols** in the club's badges
- The **image scheme** and **conceptual metaphors** surrounding the game
- The **parole** and **langue** effects on the terminology in the game
- How **oculesics** and **kenisis** can have big changes on the largest moments of a match
- The specific **grammar** used in advertising to appeal to people
- How different **biosphere** changed the development of the game around the world
- Different **connotations** and **denotations** associated with club badges
- The various different **codes** involved in soccer

This paper is a usage of semiotics to approach an interesting topic and see some aspects of the sport from a different than usual perspective. Hopefully, some of the ideas talked about here made people see the game differently and maybe they will watch a game for the first time, or maybe just see the sport a little differently.