Roberto de Jesús Díaz Padilla

A Pragmatic and Stylistic Analysis of Wrestling Discourse

A Pragmatic and Stylistic Analysis of Wrestling Discourse

ABSTRACT: Pro wrestling is an entertainment form that traditionally has been disdained by purists for its inherent duality as a sport and as an arranged show. A disparity in its value is also observed in the cultural life of society, where it is regularly seen as not being a worthy subject of study. Research concerning pro wrestling has mostly been carried out in sociological terms, but there has been little academic work done in the area of linguistics. This paper explores the stylistic choices made by two performers of the WWE wrestling company in televised spoken segments, and analyzes their interaction with the audience employing pragmatic criteria.

KEY WORDS: pro wrestling, linguistics, stylistics, pragmatics, interaction.

RESUMEN: La lucha libre profesional es una forma de entretenimiento que tradicionalmente ha sido desdeñada por puristas debido a su inherente dualidad como deporte y como espectáculo predeterminado. Esta disparidad en su apreciación también se observa en la vida cultural de la sociedad, donde regularmente se ve como un tema no merecedor de análisis académico. La investigación concerniente a la lucha libre se ha realizado principalmente alrededor de aspectos sociológicos, pero existe poco trabajo académico en el área de lingüística. Este artículo explora las decisiones estilísticas tomadas por dos atletas de la compañía WWE en segmentos hablados de sus programas televisados, y analiza la interacción de los atletas con la audiencia a través de criterios de la pragmática.

PALABRAS CLAVE: lucha libre, lingüística, estilística, pragmática, interacción.

Roberto de Jesús
Díaz Padilla
space.movies@gmail.com
Universidad de Guadalajara

Introduction

Pro wrestling as a cultural text is loaded with ambivalence and dualities. The tension between its conceptualization as sport and as spectacle is a trademark of pro wrestling, and so is its blurred distinction between factual portrayal of reality and fictionalized depictions. The convergence in wrestling of expressions from legitimate

sports competition and purely artistic and aesthetic elements has created a varied but recognizable entertainment form. However, that very integration of sports and arts disciplines in the same activity has been a major source for criticism of wrestling and wrestling fans. Common mocking remarks appear as attacks on the gullibility of the consumer and the apparent impossibility to enjoy a pretended competitive sport that is fundamentally arranged.

To maintain the illusion and reduce the contrast with external reality, wrestling used to have a tight confidential code, known in pro wrestling jargon as *kayfabe*, in which the audience would hardly get a glimpse at the inner workings of the business. Likewise, the performers and staff couldn't share wrestling elements with the outside world (see Geels, 2018, p. 119). In some cases, the commitment to maintain illusion would be so strong that performers couldn't be seen in real life interacting with their rivals from wrestling events, and the protection of identity for masked wrestlers is still a major feature to observe. With the expansion of the internet and the subsequent rise of social media, *kayfabe* basically disappeared, and technology along with the knowledge of the fans began to be used in favor of the wrestling business, convoluting the interplay between reality and fiction even more.

The spoken interaction of wrestlers with the audience shows traces of this interplay, accessing shared world knowledge, referencing other cultural texts and dynamically shifting their role in the interaction. As with their outfit, physique and attacks in the ring, wrestlers have a choice in the language style they use to communicate with the audience and with each other in each show. The stylistic choices they make are to be interpreted in a context that merges the manufactured reality of the internal storylines, with the external reality of the wrestler, the company, and the audience. This overlap of situational elements make communication between wrestlers and audience an interaction prone to accidents and negotiation. In this paper I intend to analyze, in stylistic and pragmatic terms, what goes on in this communication between wrestlers and audience, and I intend to highlight the unusual phenomena that arises from such exchanges.

Literature Review

To analyze the linguistic phenomena that take place in the wrestler/audience interaction it is important to look at the nature of such relationships and the surrounding factors that help shape it. As I stated earlier, wrestling features similarities with several other sports and art forms. Evidently, wrestling is most associated with combat sports. After all, at its core, wrestling is a representation of sanctioned physical struggle. Elements like the ring and arenas where wrestling matches usually take place, incorporate part of the affective meaning of those locations in boxing, and adapt them to the particular needs of wrestling. The same occurs with competition rules and awards such as championship belts and trophies, which give the sense of structure, fairness, and purposefulness other combat sports have but at the same time, they shape the formal possibilities of wrestling as a sport event. On the side of the arts, as a representation carried out mainly through bodily and additionally linguistic

means, performative disciplines represent the most salient connection to wrestling. The acrobatics and athleticism involved in matches allude to dance choreographies and circus acts. But perhaps the most common association is with acting.

In his text "The World of Wrestling", French sociologist Roland Barthes comments on the grandiloquence of the actions in the ring, noting that "[e]ach sign in wrestling is […] endowed an absolute clarity, since one must understand everything on the spot" (Barthes, 1972, pp. 16-17). Moments, attacks and the effects of these attacks are emphasized to generate a greater involvement of the audience in the match. Also, the motions and gestures of performers can help convey information about the wrestling persona they portray and, in some conceptions of the wrestling show, spoken language in talking segments helps express much of the personality and philosophy of the character. As a narrative carried out in front of a live audience with wrestlers that take on the role of characters, wrestling shares many coincidences with the foundational elements of theater. Both forms feature performers that play scripted characters in a story composed of a clear beginning, climax and resolution, and where improvising is a major agent. Considering the serialized format most wrestling promotions use currently, one can even trace parallels to the overarching storylines and character development found in TV series.

Notably, though, since every wrestling show is carried out live in a venue, and possibly simultaneously streamed, in every outing a large amount of feedback is obtained, giving production staff and performers the possibility to timely react to unpopular decisions.

Taking into account the aforementioned elements, a model for the dialectic between wrestling and fans, based on the Kerbrat-Orecchioni's Enunciation Framework (1980, p. 27), would include the wrestlers on one side, with restrictions and delimitations set by the creative department of the company, and the demands of the wrestling community. And on the other side, the audience, bound by the medium they use to engage with wrestling, and the regulations of such medium. Despite the fact that according to the standards established by Cook (1989, p. 51; Cutting, 2008, pp. 26-27), this kind of interaction does not comply altogether with the traditional definition of conversation, I contend that the wrestler-audience relationship represents an exchange of information that would be the equivalent to an ongoing conversation reshaping both sides in the process.

Linguistic exchange among wrestlers and the fan base involves the previous agreement to participate in a manufactured spectacle where communication is mediated by the character the wrestler plays. Spoken utterances reflect the personality of a wrestling character sustained by the interpretation of the person playing it. Likewise, the audience is expected to react to the character, not necessarily the person playing it. However, in contemporary wrestling practices as in most other popular entertainment forms, the personal becomes public, and the border between the character and the performer becomes more diffuse. This amalgamation of personalities and the dual ambitions of realism and illusion to which pro wrestling aspires, provide

Roberto de Jesús Díaz Padilla. A Pragmatic and Stylistic Analysis of Wrestling Discourse"

a vast field to explore intertextuality, style variations and pragmatic traits in linguistic production.

As I stated earlier, the people who produce, manage and follow wrestling matches are a tight community. Among them, there is constant exchange not only of financial resources, but also of opinions, intentions and affections. To explore the characteristics of such interrelation, I considered employing concepts from the area of pragmatics. Pragmatics provides a useful toolkit for dissecting communicative phenomena in the wrestling world since it can offer insights into the conditions displayed in the production of the message and the factors that hinder or facilitate its reception. The analysis of speech acts can help us identify the interplay among form, purpose and context, through the distinction in locution, illocution and perlocution (Cutting, 2008, p. 14) Likewise, consideration of Grice's conversational maxims can let us see the creativity performers show when flouting particular principles to get specific reactions from fans. And finally, the study of politeness provides a look into community building strategies that appeal to the positive face of the spectator to garner favorable responses from the crowd, or the intentional violation of politeness principles to drive the audience into negative responses for narrative purposes in wrestling storylines.

Stylistics, as the study of individual and social language variation, can help identify the strategies by which the attitudes and motivations of fictional personas are built through language. Key to stylistic interpretation of texts are features such as focalization, taken from narrative theory, and foregrounding. Described by Bal as "the relations between the elements presented and the vision through which they are presented […] the relation between the vision and that which is 'seen', perceived" (1999, p. 142), focalization allows one to determine whose experiences, narrations or claims the audience is listening to and because of that, what biases such utterances may display. Foregrounding, the emphasis on linguistic elements by virtue of their saliency, in regards to other elements in the text, is useful in identifying linguistic creativity of the performers and distinguishing what, to them as characters, is important information to convey to the audience.

The subject matter of reception and crowd behavior in sports events has been researched extensively in the area of sociology. Hunt, Bristol and Bashaw (1999) developed a typology of fans that departs from binary reductionism, like casual and serious, and opted for gradients that take into account temporal, spatial and identity components, overlapping with other existing typologies that recall the heterogeneity of the crowds. On the other hand, in her article linking Interaction Ritual Theory (the theorization of emotional dynamics emerging from social interaction [see Collins, 2004]) to sports fandoms, Cottingham (2012, p. 170-171) comments on the importance of sharing views and moods about the perceived object (in this case, the sports event) with other participants as starting ingredients to establish a solid community, and generate outcomes of solidarity as well as fan convergence.

In regards to academic research on wrestling, being such a divisive and unique cultural text, a large proportion of the writ-

ing devoted to it is in the area of the social sciences. The distinctiveness of the audio-visual signs found in wrestling events have also produced interest for semiotic studies (see Quinn & Silvera, 2018). However, there are few papers pairing wrestling and linguistics.

Linking pragmatics and stylistics to the related art and sports disciplines mentioned above, there are relevant studies concerning behaviors of performers and their effect on the audience. De Marinis and Dwyer (1987) analyze the subject of cultural reception in the context of theater in *Dramaturgy of the Spectator*. They describe the attendees in a play as active participants, making meaning and engaging in the story being represented, and in an ongoing interaction with the performance of the actors. Lucky (2015) and Wulandari, Hapstari & Bram (2018) approach pragmatic relations in contemporary fictional TV series looking at impoliteness and communication failures, and the effect they generate on character interaction and, consequently, on the reception of the viewers. Richardson (2010) provides some insights into the approaches and limitations of stylistics in the analysis of TV drama, such as the downplaying of visual and technical aspects which a logocentric analysis may reveal, and the shift in focus that could arise when working from scripts versus working with transcriptions of performances.

Methodology

I intend to analyze two samples of talking segments (known in wrestling terminology as "promos") from two different shows of the WWE promotion. The reason for selecting these particular promos is that they feature opposing characteristics. The first promo, showcasing a character named Sami Zayn (played by Canadian wrestler Rami Sebei), is from a bad guy (or "heel") whose job is to generate negative responses from the crowd. The second one features wrestler Becky Lynch (played by the Irish performer Rebecca Quinn) who is a fan-favorite and is attempting to generate enthusiasm over an upcoming wrestling event.

My interest in these spoken interactions is in the communicative process that occurs between wrestlers and audience, and the linguistic resources employed to obtain specific emotional reactions. The analysis of such stylistic choices in the communicative event will also allow us to perceive the extent to which elements of the contextual reality interact, or not, with the internal narrative of the show.

The linguistic aspects I have focused on for the analysis relate to the semantic content the wrestlers mention, the elements that the wrestlers selected to foreground in their expression, and the particularities in structure and meaning exchange in their interaction with the audience.

At the semantic level, I look at the abstract and concrete **referents** the wrestlers incorporate in their promos, as well as the **descriptors** they use alongside those items. This allows for the dissection of areas of reality within the pro wrestling world and in the broader reality that are predominant in the spoken segments, and how positively or negatively they are portrayed.

In reference to the connection with external realities and other types of discourse, I considered looking at the **intertextuality** found in the promos selected. To further examine the manner in which

content is depicted, I address **focalization**, that is, the point of view from which a text (regardless of form or media) is presented, to discover what perspectives the wrestler actively includes in the spoken segment, whether or not the fictional character and the person behind it are presented separately in the promo, and if the view of the audience is alluded to in the interaction. **Style** and **register** are key in my analysis to account for linguistic choices, and to highlight the distinctive traits that make a character identifiable.

With regards to the components of the wrestler-audience dialogical interaction, I analyze the wrestlers' linguistic utterances in accordance to **speech act** theory in order to elucidate the intention driving their message and how that intention is received by the audience. Through **Grice's conversational maxims** I verify whether they are upheld and if they are not, the reason for intentionally flouting them. I consider the degree of engagement and inclusion displayed to the audience via indicators of **politeness** and **solidarity**, and I address the formal characteristics of the interaction through the analysis of **turn-taking** and the **responses** expressed by the audience.

Analysis

In the first promo (which can be read in *Appendix 1*), heel character Sami Zayn complains about the attitude of the fans. The referents in his speech are predominantly concepts pertaining to the areas of psychology and the humanities, used as basis to explain his comprehension of the flaws of the audience. Ideas intended to mock the spoiled behavior of the fans, and elements from the wrestling career of the man behind the character represent the other two major thematic axes in the segment.

Sami employs positive descriptors mostly in relation to himself and he uses negative qualifiers for the audience. Since the segment is intended to come across as a complaint, the majority of his linguistic output is devoted to making evaluative assertions. Sami attempts to give more validity to the complaint, and provide a characterization to the negative traits of the fans through an anecdote recounted in the middle of the promo. After the anecdote, and before providing a closure to his spoken performance, he asks a series of questions phrased in a manner that leads the audience to either agree with him or to give an impression of insensitive people, furthering the grounds for his complaint.

Sami constantly makes the case of excluding himself from the people in the audience. He portrays the audience as the demanding child in the narration he inserted, challenging their notions of how to engage with wrestling as their hobby. Meanwhile, he depicts himself as the voice of reason and an agent for justice. Keeping with his aura of moral superiority, Sami uses formal vocabulary at the beginning of the promo and can be said to violate the conversational maxim of quantity by sharing many unnecessary details, ultimately appearing as a pedantic character.

While Sami provides few opportunities for the audience to participate in the form of questions, he makes several pauses to allow reactions to his speech. The response from the audience regularly occurs as booing, and sometimes they respond with an

interrogative (e.g. "What?") playing on an established wrestling trope intended to exasperate the wrestler talking. Through their limited voicing, the fans clearly express their dislike of the character.

In the second promo (full transcription available in *Appendix 2*), featuring wrestler Becky Lynch, the dynamics of the interaction are notably different. Becky is addressing the audience five days before the most important wrestling show of the year in the company ("Wrestlemania" in its thirty-fifth edition), and she is in the main event (i.e. the main match) for the show. It is the first time women are featured in the main event for Wrestlemania.

In her promo, she recalls the matches she had with the opponents scheduled for Wrestlemania to trace how she arrived at her current spot and her expectations for that main-event match. To refer to her rivals, besides using their in-ring name, she also calls them by the nickname they have in TV broadcast and marketing media, linking the iconicity of the names to descriptors highlighting major traits in their appearance or attitude.

Becky attempts to show inclusiveness of the audience by using an informal register and employing short and simple phrases that seek to be emotionally direct. Because of this tendency for directness and because she relies on shared knowledge with the audience, Becky flouts the conversational maxim of quantity. To reinforce the sense of community with her colleagues and fans, she involves them as well through the use of pronouns, saying, for example "look at *us* now" and "*our* revolution" (emphasis in italics is mine). Both phrases also hint at the past and present state of WWE and of society at large, noting in particular the progress made in gender equality.

Throughout her promo, Becky pauses regularly to let fans express their reactions. Besides cheering and chanting Becky's name, individual fans can be heard expressing support to the wrestler (such as a man yelling "Yes, Becky!" in approval). Utterances of this kind lack the volume and resonance found in unified crowd responses, but they are more detailed representations of the emotional effects generated by the wrestler's performance.

Conclusions

As evidenced by the two promos analyzed, wrestlers make use of surrounding realities to provide credibility to the linguistic expression of their characters, and the performers swiftly navigate between their real identity and their fictional persona without major complications. To generate the desired reactions whether the performer is classified as a heel or a baby face, wrestlers employ varied resources. The register performers engage is of great importance to generate positive or negative reactions, as it is often considered an indicator of approachability or arrogance. Brand recognition and a sense of belonging proved to be another aspect to experiment with the polarity of the audience: Whereas the character of Sami Zayn criticizes the form in which the audience expresses their fandom, Becky involves the audience in the celebration of the historical moment of the wrestling company in her promo. Also, more events, characters and items relating to WWE are mentioned in her segment as compared with Sami's. The voice of the crowd in both cases is allowed for

and invited by brief pauses in the spoken interventions of the wrestlers, which configure the reactions to be short sentences, single words, or vocal noises. In such circumstances the adoption of the "What?" "What?" interjections and stadium chants are excellent adaptations to the format of the interaction in wresting spoken segments, and they can represent an adequate indicator of the success of a heel or baby face wrestler, as well as an authoritative resource in the possession of fans to vocalize approval or disapproval of the direction of the shows.

Beyond the interaction in the ring with other wrestlers and the audience, pragmatics and stylistics can provide insightful results in other areas of the pro wrestling activity. As an entertainment form that involves contexts outside the arena in its discussion, planning, and reception, a look into backstage relations between performers, the interaction of the fan base in relation to the product or the online communication among fans, the wrestling promotion as a corporate institution, and wrestlers in regards to their personal and in-character tweets, all make for appealing further research opportunities into the intricacies of the linguistic phenomenon of pro wrestling.

Appendix 1

Key
referents
positive descriptors
negative descriptors
formal lexical ítems
intonation emphasis
[audience reaction]

Sami Zayn gives the WWE Universe a psychology lesson: RAW, April 29, 2019 (https://youtu.be/57XY-QTzFVNw)

[boooo]

Sami Zayn: And I just **want** to clarify something… The **joy** that I've been **experiencing** isn't just cause I went on a couple of lovely **trips**… It's because **over the last nine months** recovering from shoulder surgery, I did a **lot** of soul-searching…

[indistinct screaming]

SZ: I did a **lot** of deep introspection. I had **time** to rekindle my love for **a variety** of subjects, like **hi**story and and sociology and psychology**,** things that makes *us* understand the human condition heh and it's funny cause specially with regards to psychology… it really helped me make sense of… you people

[what? … boooo]

In **fact**, there's one psychological concept that really stuck with me and I think *you*'ll agree that it really does pertain to all of you. Can we just put it up here… for a moment

screen shows the definition of psychological entitlement [booooo]

Yeah yeah **booo** because maybe it hits a little too close to home, right?... The **point** is you've come to **think**… that what you feel is co**rrect**, and that… whatever you w**ant** should be given to you

[what?]

In fact, if you don't get exaaactly what you want, e**xac**tly **when** you want it, exactly **how** you want it, you throw a fit, you throw this little baby tantrums

[what?]

quiet laughter Last **week** flying **home** at the **air**port. At **four** in the

morning, this *soulless* father walks up with his five-year-old son and he pushes him along to me and says *mimicking voice* "go on, son, ask him, ask him" and the little boy **asks** me… to **sign** one of my action figures

[what?]

Now naturally I said no

[what?]

And he burst into tears, and he cried, and he ran into daddy's arms. Now… do… do you think that made me feel good?

[indistinct screaming]

You honestly think that made me feel good

[what?]

Okay, that says a lot more about you than you realize, cause it didn't make me feel good. **Ac**tually, it made me **sick.** And the reason it made me sick, more than anything is because this kid **al**ready **at age 5** has already been **taught** that he is **owed** something. **At age 5**, he **al**ready thinks that **I** owe **him** something. Guess what, junior? I don't owe **you** anything, just the same way I don't owe any one of you a **damn** thing

[booooo]

hah I think I've been more than generous. I think three shoulder surgeries. And **seventeen years** of five-star classic matches is pretty good, no?

[nooo]

I think I've been pretty fair. So from here on now, you get whatever I give you…

[booo]

hahaha haha it's so funny cause I got people coming up to me and attacking me left and right and saying *mocking voice* "*you know uuh, uuh… if you don't like WWE you know you should just quit… yeah if you don't*

like it here you know just quit" […] You like that? Is that what you want? You want Sami Zayn to quit WWE?

[yes, yes, yes / no, no, no]

Hey trust me, **believe me**, when I tell you that quitting WWE **would be** *kisses fingers* **amazing**! It would be **amaaz-ing**! But you know what would be just a little bit more amazing? Is coming out here week after week and holding every **single one of you** accountable for your **actions** *mocking tone*… coming out here week after week and calling you out on your **crap**… coming out here week after week and being the critic of the critics. That's right the **critic of the critics**. For far too long you've been drunk with power and nobody's had the courage to stand up to you, but it is high time that **Sami Zayn takes** the power **back!**

Sami Zayn drops his microphone. His theme song starts

Appendix 2

Becky Lynch recalls her Road to Wrestlemania (April 2, 2019) (https://youtu.be/gjX3chGYDh8)

Becky Lynch: Man, I was thinking in the back of that cop car: what a difference a year makes!

[cheers]

BL: Whoah

At this time last year, myself and Charlotte were the best of friends, Ronda Rousey was about to make her debut at Wrestlemania [some scattered boos] it was like all the stars were aligned to get The Queen and The Baddest Woman on the Planet into the main event of this year's Wrestlemania

yeeeehhh that was until I smacked the smoothness off Charlotte Flair's face at Summerslam!

That that one strike that one strike changed **everything**! I was determined at that point that I was gonna do whatever it took to fight to get into this year's Wrestlemania… and **look** at us **now**!

[cheers]

[Becky! Becky! Becky!]

BL: oh ho ho ho this Sunday, MetLife Stadium, 80,000 people

[woman screaming in excitement]

BL: The first time ever the women are the main event of Wrestlemania

[cheers]

The Queen, The Baddest Woman on the Planet, and The Man

[cheers]

Going **head**, to head, to **head**

My revolution. Our revolution. **The real revolution!** That started last year at Summerslam with a **slap**… is gonna explooode this Sunday

[cheers, screams] [man screaming: yeah!] [another man yeeeeah]

When the winner takes all [man in the audience: hahahaha] and I make one of them **dopes** tap!

[cheers] [man: yes Becky!]

So the next time you see me, *lads*, I'm gonna be the champ that I knew I **al**ways **was:** the double champ!

[cheers]

Becky Lynch drops the microphone. Her theme song plays

References

Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang. Retrieved from http://www.ngca.co.uk/docs/Barthes_WorldOfWrestling.pdf

Cottingham, M. D. (2012). Interaction ritual theory and sports fans: Emotion, symbols, and solidarity. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, *29(2)*: 168-185. Retrieved from https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/06e3/ca3181f51f1b5bfd0abd53a8574ca-f4a507a.pdf

Cutting, J. (2008). *Pragmatics and Discourse. A resource book for students* (2nd ed). New York: Routledge English Language Introductions.

Hunt, K. A., Bristol, T., & Bashaw, R. E. (1999). A conceptual approach to classifying sports fans. *Journal of services marketing*, *13(6)*: 439-452. Retrieved from https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/543b/16f76be85ff7571864369aefa5eddb-74de1b.pdf

Kerbrat-Orecchioni, C. (1986). *La enunciación. De la subjetividad en el lenguaje*. Buenos Aires: Hachette: 117-135. Retrieved from https://textosenlinea.com.ar/textos/Kerbrat.pdf

Lucky B, J. (2015). *A Pragmatic Analysis of Impoliteness Strategies in British TV-series Sherlock*. Yogyakarta: Yogyakarta State University. Retrieved from https://core.ac.uk/display/33528571

De Marinis, M. & Dwyer, P. (1987) Dramaturgy of the *Spectator The Drama Review: TDR, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Summer, 1987)*: 100-114. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/1145819

Quinn, J., & Silveira, C. (2018). Analyzing Discourse in Sports Entertainment through Multiple Modalities. *The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, *189*. Retrieved from www.researchgate.net/publication/324495211

Richardson, K. (2010). Multimodality and the study of popular drama. *Language and Literature 19 (4)*: 378-395