



## Language and Controversy: A Case of Ronaldo-Messi Who Is Who

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**Abstract** This paper investigated the linguistic and literary features of the submissions and rebuffs of the language of debate or controversy particularly that of the Ronaldo-Messi-who-is-who debates through the emotions of joy and anger. Findings reveal that linguistically, submissions of both joy and anger are done through content descriptive lexical items, namely, nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs. Literarily, the two polar emotions employed literary devices such as metaphor, hyperbole, transferred epithet, allusion, repetition, oxymoron, imagery, rhetorical questions, parallelism and rhythm in their submissions. The submissions of anger display more sophistication particularly in the employment of literary devices. This has an implication for cognitive linguistics as to whether the linguistic atmosphere of anger creates more mental pictures than that of joy.

**Keywords:** Language and controversy, who is who, Ronaldo, Messi, debates, joy, anger, emotions, linguistics, literature.

### 1. Introduction

The debate as to who is a better footballer between Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi is one known all over the world, particularly among the youth and lovers of football. The controversy this generates is so rife that whenever this debate is raised among people, emotions run high. All these emotions, particularly the polar ones of joy and anger, are all expressed through the vehicle of thought, language.

Since language displays unique characteristics regarding the context and atmosphere in which it is used, the present paper's focus is to investigate the linguistic and literary characteristics that the language of the Ronaldo-Messi-who-is-who debates possess. The paper essentially zooms in on the expressions of the emotions of joy and anger in support of or against Ronaldo or Messi. The paper is sectioned under the following sub-titles: *research questions, literature review, method, discussions and conclusion.*

### 2. Research Questions

This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the linguistic and literary characteristics of the expressions of joy in Ronaldo-Messi who is who debates?

2. What are the linguistic and literary characteristics of the expressions of anger in the Ronaldo-Messi-who-is-who debates?

3. What are the theoretical implications of language use in the polar emotions of joy and anger?

### 3. Literature Review

Human emotions and how they are expressed physically, linguistically and paralinguistically have drawn the attention of some scholars over the years. Notable among such scholars are Korecses (1995) and Lakoff (1987). Korecses (1990:3) submitted that the prescribed language employed to express emotions "can be an important tool in discovering the structure ... and content of our emotion concepts." We deduce from Korecses (1990) that the expression of all emotions in language have implications to understanding our emotions better. No doubt language has played tremendous role in expressing human emotions. Apart from physical manifestations of the emotions such as joy and anger, context and observation play major roles in who says what and in what colour of emotion. It is the belief of the researcher that since human emotions of joy and anger are psychologically complex, so would the language through which they are expressed, hence the focus of this paper to is to investigate the language of the polar emotions of joy and anger via the popular potentially volatile debate of Ronaldo-Messi who is who in the football world.

Taylor and Mbense (1998) investigated some expressions that Zulu speakers use to describe anger. His focus was on the expressions that employ the literary devices of metaphor and metonymy. Even prima facie, we note that the expressions that the Zulu use to describe anger are in themselves rich in literary characteristics. If this is the case with expressions used to talk about anger in the case of Zulu, the likelihood of the language of expressing anger itself possessing linguistic and literary qualities worth investigating is very high. That is the focus of the present paper whose thrust is to unearth how language is employed in debates or arguments when the emotions run from joy to anger in popular global debates such as the Ronaldo-Messi who is who which is very rife within and without the football world.



Fussel and Moss (1998:1) also conducted a study into figurative language in emotional communication. One major conclusion they drew from their findings is that “figurative language is ubiquitous in many forms of discourse” and they can be easily understood in context just like literal statements. Fussel and Moss (1998:1) further submit that “there have been relatively few rigorous studies of figurative language in everyday conversation”. From them, we realize that all forms of discourse have the capacity to demonstrate literariness and that literariness is not only found in formal and special use of language. We also note that very little scholarly attention is given to everyday conversation. This is one of the gaps the present paper seeks to fill by zooming in on a very everyday debate among lovers of football as to who is who better between Ronaldo and Messi.

Other scholars such as Kulick (2004) and Maalej (2004) studied expressions of anger in Papua New Guinea and the figurative expressions of anger in Tunisian Arabic respectively. A glance at the literature on emotions such as the foregoing reveals that a lot of attention is given to anger to the neglect of the other extreme emotion of joy in language studies. In the light of this neglect, the present paper seeks to investigate the language of both joy and of anger, in the popular Ronaldo-Messi-who-is-who debates, focusing not only on its literariness but also on the linguistic characteristics they possess.

#### 4. Method

This paper adopts a qualitative research approach where emotion-packed unplanned debates among football loving students and lecturers of the University of Energy and Natural Resources, Ghana, as to who is the better footballer between Ronaldo and Messi are recorded and transcribed. These debates were triggered by the researcher’s question ‘Who is the better footballer between Ronaldo and Messi?’ The debates were recorded usually after a football match that involved either Ronaldo, Messi or both. Submissions and rebuffs in the moods of joy or anger in support of either figure was recorded and transcribed. These two sets of data were analysed linguistically and literarily to unearth the linguistic and literary artistry that the language of this type of debate possesses. Particular attention is given to diction and the employment of literary devices, making the paper fully descriptive.

#### 5. Discussions

This section discusses the findings of the present paper, taking the research questions one after the

other. The subtitle below presents the submissions of joy in support of or against Ronaldo or Messi.

#### 5.1 Submissions of Joy

The first research question seeks to unearth the linguistic and literary characteristics of the submissions of joy in the Ronaldo-Messi debates. The following examples from data answer that question.

1. Ronaldo is at Messi’s mercy. That’s why Messi mercifully gave him five Ballon d’Ors.
2. Even the great call him great. Lionel Messi, the merciful lion.
3. You see Ronaldo’s goal against Juve? That wasn’t a goal. It was gold.
4. The commentator insulted Ronaldo by calling that kick a bicycle kick. Come on! That’s a spaceship kick!
5. Alexander the great? No. Ronaldo the Great. Lisbon fell. Manchester fell. Madrid fell. Turin fell!
6. Messi is football’s fashion designer. You see the trousers he sewed for Milner?

First, we look at the linguistic characteristics of the expressions of joy in the Ronaldo-Messi arguments. Data reveals that in the expressions of joy, concrete lexical items – nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs – are preferred. We note from Example 1 the use of *mercy* and *mercifully*. Example 2 reveals *great*, *merciful* and *lion*. We see *goal* and *gold* in Example 3. Noticeable in Example 4 are concrete lexical items such as *kick*, *spaceship*, *commentator* and *bicycle*. Example 5 presents the adjective *great* and the action verb *kick*. Example 6 presents a noun phrase *fashion designer*, and another noun *trousers*. In the preference for concrete lexical items as we have seen, we notice some peculiarities. For example, in the phrases *bicycle kick*, *spaceship kick*, and *fashion designer*, we see nouns functioning in premodification; the nouns *bicycle* in *bicycle kick*, *spaceship* in *spaceship kick*, and *fashion* in *fashion designer* have all rankshifted down to perform the function of modification basically reserved for adjectives. This rankshifting of the nouns in question is the case inasmuch as the centre of the study – Ronaldo and Messi and football – warrant a lot of description, which is the primary function of adjectives. This conclusion is concretized by the presence of other descriptive lexical items such as the verbs *kick*, *fell*, the adverb *mercifully* and the noun *mercy*. The presentation of joy in the Ronaldo-Messi who is who debate encapsulates



concrete lexical items, namely, nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs.

The second part of data on joy reveals the artistic use of language in the submissions of respondents. This artistry combines imagery and the use of literary devices. Example 1 shows the employment of alliteration and pun. The former concerns the repetitive use of usually consonant sounds while the latter refers to the artistic word play based on homonyms or homographs. In Example 1, *Messi's mercy* and *Messi mercifully...* combine both an alliteration and a pun. The consonant bilabial nasal /m/ in *Messi* and *mercy* is repeated and there is the play on the words *Messi* and *mercy* for their almost perfect homophonic qualities. The significance of these figures of speech is to create rhythm, music, which in itself is one main way joy is expressed. In this way the joy of the moment is expressed via the conscious choice of words that are musical in themselves and that express joy. Dupriez (1991:23, 364) submits that "alliteration may also create comic effect" and that puns which are a play on words "take place more frequently in colloquial language" where decoding is easier than in other forms of literature. The researcher observed the veracity of the foregoing in that respondents, albeit of opposing views, were relaxed and laughed out the submissions of their opponents. No doubt these submissions were uttered when respondents were in a happy mood.

In Example 2, repetition and oxymoron are employed in the examples *great... great* and *merciful lion* respectively. The repetition of *great* produces rhythm much as does a musical note (Author, 2018). Embedded in this rhythm is joy, the very emotion in which this figure of speech is expressed. The oxymoron in *merciful lion* is that it is a fact that lions are wild and prey on other animals. Their presence puts fear into other animals. And lions are not in any way merciful; the oxymoron lies in these contrasting meanings whose significance is that, first, it is a praise of the subject of Messi. In that praise, we note his comparison to a lion, revealing the superior qualities of a lion attached to Messi by the speaker. In that way we deduce that if Messi is a lion, the king of the jungle, Ronaldo must be inferior to him. This is the argument that the oxymoron carries. Second, the speaker plays on Messi's first name *Lionel* which means *young lion*. By referring to Messi as merciful lion, the speaker is just revoking the meaning of *Lionel*. Besides, by merciful lion, the speaker suggests that Ronaldo's five Ballon d'Ors were gifts of mercy from Messi in that Messi could

have won all the ten Ballon d'Ors so far won between the two.

Example 3 is from a Ronaldo fan. The example employs two literary devices – a rhetorical question and a metaphor. The former is a question whose answer is self-evident used primarily for stylistic effect and when a speaker is trying to work up the emotional temperature of the linguistic atmosphere (Cuddon, 1999). We note that the answer to the question is obvious as the participants were well aware of the reference of the rhetorical question. We can conclude from Cuddon (1999) that the speaker is working the emotional temperature (joy) in order to present his point, which is well captioned in another figure of speech, a metaphor. This metaphor of Ronaldo's *goal* side by side *gold* spells the quality the speaker attaches to Ronaldo's goal in question. In the light of the fact that gold is beautiful and expensive, the significance of the metaphor is that Ronaldo's goal is so expensive and beautiful that Messi cannot score (buy) a goal of such quality.

Example 4 is also from another Ronaldo fan. A pro-Ronaldo point is built and released in a hyperbole where a *bicycle kick* is replaced by a *spaceship kick*. In fact, there is no such thing in football as a *spaceship kick*. The speaker by this hyperbole submits that Ronaldo's bicycle kick of reference is too good to remain within the range of a *bicycle kick*. It has to be something exceptional, hence a *spaceship kick*.

Another argument for Ronaldo is captured in Example 5. A historical allusion is employed here where Ronaldo is compared to Alexander the Great, whose greatness the speaker says Ronaldo surpasses. This allusion projects Ronaldo to a very great level in the view points of the speaker. This greatness is moved further into another literary device in the same example, parallelism, which according to Dupriez (1991:318), is "correspondences between two parts of an utterance are emphasized by means syntactic and rhythmic repetition." The syntactic and rhythmic repetition in the example is *Lisbon fell. Manchester fell. Madrid fell. Turin fell.*, a four two-word sentences each made up of a single subject and a single verb, the verb being *fell* in all its four appearances. Even by sight, we see rhythm spelt in this joyful well thought out submission. While these fallings of the cities of Lisbon, Manchester, Madrid and Turin by Ronaldo are actually drawn side by side Alexander the Great's conquests and projecting Ronaldo by comparing him to a great historical figure outside football, the parallelism also spells rhythm which is music and shows the



artistry that language carries if users are in a joyful mood.

The sixth example come from a Messi supporter. Here Messi is compared to a fashion designer who sewed trousers for Milner. This metaphor is rich in meaning insofar as the footballer himself is given another role outside football – a *fashion designer* – and his dribble to *sewing trousers*. By this metaphor the Messi fan draws on the aesthetics of fashion designing to Messi's football exploits. In straight terms, the respondent means that Messi's football is beautiful to the eyes as the designs from a fashion designer.

We have so far seen the depth of linguistic and literary artistry that language displays in the context of debates or controversies such as the Ronaldo-Messi who is who that has been with the world for more than a decade now.

## 5.2 Submissions of Anger

This section discusses the linguistic and literary artistry embedded in the submissions of respondents of the Ronaldo-Messi-who-is-who debates particularly when the speaker expresses their submissions with anger. Let us look at the following examples:

7. Tell me, foolishly, why you think not even winning a pin for his national team makes Messi better than the king of Portugal.

8. I'm tired of this talent versus hard work vomit. To me, Ronaldo is a footballer and Messi is football.

9. You see when you keep grunting like that, you scare the penalty skill out of Messi. He'll kick the ball over Everest and burst into flames of tears.

10. Hey! Mister Ronaldson, how much money does Ronaldo pay you monthly?

11. This your love for Ronaldo shows you're a blunt sword.

12. I thought it's only your eyes that can't see. You have bigger glasses on your brain. It's Messi! Go and die!

We can see that as in the case of the expressions of joy, content lexical items dominate the submissions of anger also, and their in-depth discussion would be repetitive.

We now turn out attention to the literary beauty encompassed in these submissions of anger. The dominant literary device employed in Example 7 is a transferred epithet, defined by Shenghuan (2011) as a figure of speech in which the epithet (a modifier) is transferred from an appropriate noun to

modify something else to which it does not naturally relate. The epithet *foolishly* in Example 7 does not naturally relate to *tell* as it suggests in the example. Its reference is an exophoric *you*, the one addressed, which is recoverable from context. The significance of this transferred epithet is to euphemize the attack against the addressee. In this euphemism, another literary device, we see the artistic way a rather harsh statement has been softened by both a linguistic placement of a lexical item and a literary beauty in which it is presented.

The use of metaphor dominates Example 8. The argument as to Ronaldo being a hard worker while Messi is talented is compared to vomit. The point is clear; this rebuttal is to render that argument in question as of no use, hence its comparison to vomit. The second metaphor is where Messi is said to be football. The significance of this metaphor is an argument in favour of Ronaldo, although on the surface, looks like one in support of Messi. A football by itself cannot do anything and it is useless without footballers. By referring to Messi as a football while Ronaldo is a footballer, the speaker is submitting artistically that Messi should be grateful to be compared to Ronaldo and that Ronaldo metaphorically is superior to and can kick Messi around since Messi is just a football. The artistic beauty displayed in these emotional submissions is phenomenal.

In Example 9, we note the use of a metaphor in the comparison the speaker draws between the addressee and a pig by the use of *grunting*. We also note the respondent's employment of hyperbole in Messi's kicking a penalty over Mount Everest and Messi's bursting into *flames of tears*. The mental images painted by these figures of speech are rich in both meaning and beauty. The metaphor of the addressee *grunting* is a verbal attack that clearly shows the speaker's mood of anger. That anger glides into the exaggeration found in the hyperbole of a penalty going over Mount Everest and flames of tears. The excessive exaggeration and the metaphor used in this example projects the imagery meant to break an opponent's defences and render him psychologically weak and susceptible to lose the fiery debate.

The rhetorical question in Example 10 reveals the charged atmosphere of the Ronaldo-Messi-who-is-who arguments. By this rhetorical question whose answer is self-evident, the speaker, a pro-Messi leaves the argument and attacks the person of his opponent. The significance of the rhetorical question lies in the reasoning that the opponent's arguments in favour of Ronaldo are so



weak that he must be receiving payments from Ronaldo to continue to support Ronaldo or else, something must be wrong with him. This is a simple question loaded with meaning, another demonstration of the artistry that the Ronaldo-Messi debates of anger possess.

Example 11 employs a metaphor and a transferred epithet as literary devices. Here, the speaker compares his opponent to a *blunt sword*. Much as a blunt sword cannot be used to cut things unless it is sharpened, so must the addressee work on his reasoning power to be able to present good argument, the speaker suggests. In this significance we find the transferred epithet *blunt* as not actually relating or modifying *sword* but the addressee of the speaker. In effect, the *bluntness* is tactfully directed to the addressee or the addressee's arguments. And as we saw earlier, a transferred epithet encompasses euphemism that presents a harsher statement in a more acceptable way.

The final example presents a skilful employment of imagery. In this imagery, the physical eyes are contrasted with the mental eyes, the image of reasoning. While it is normal to see people wear glasses to either protect their eyes or to be able to see better, the mental images of the brain wearing glasses is simply imaginary. The significance, therefore, of this imagery is to make a point that the brain is the mind's eye, and its inability to think or analyse things clearly means that its owner cannot present reasonable arguments. In the heat of the moment, this is clearly letting go off an argument and attacking one's opponent's personality. That notwithstanding the imagery used in this attack in the Ronaldo-Messi who is who argument is very rich.

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## 5.3 Theoretical Implication

The third research question seeks to find out the theoretical implication of the findings of the present paper. By close scrutiny, it is easy to see that the language of the submissions of anger are a cut above that of the submissions of joy as regards linguistic and literary sophistication. Linguistically, both emotions employ content descriptive lexical items. Literary, however, the submissions of anger employ more literary devices that display more sophistication than those of joy. Since literary devices are mental pictures, the present study has implications for cognitive linguistics as to whether an angry linguistic atmosphere creates more pictures in the mind than that of joy.

## 6. Conclusion

The present paper has shown that the language of emotion-packed debates such as the Ronaldo-Messi who is who common among all lovers of football is loaded with linguistic and literary artistic beauty. We have seen from the analysis of the expressions of joy and those of anger that as regards language, there was the conscious choice of content lexical items, namely, nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverb over non-content ones. Literarily, debaters employ such figures of speech as metaphor, hyperbole, transferred epithet, allusion, repetition, oxymoron, imagery and rhetorical questions to convey their points in support of their figure of interest. The implication of this paper is that language use in any context either of importance or for social or phatic communication has linguistic and literary peculiarities that must be studied to push investigations on language from the common traditional domains to domains that could be neglected because they are of little importance to humanity.



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