Temporality of emotionalizing athletes

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Sports commentators do not "just" comment. Through delivering commentary, they may negotiate their areas of expertise, construct dramatic events, or construct/reconstruct stereotypes. What follows are my preliminary, micro-ethnographic observations of one such activity that sports commentators engage: discovering and/or constructing emotions in athletes. The following 3 examples are from the Judo matches of the Japanese Abe siblings, aired during the BBC's 2020 Olympics coverage, Day 2: BBC One 12:15-15:00. Two live commentators narrated the matches, who I refer to as C1 and C2. In performing conversation analysis, I apply Paul ten Have's transcript conventions.

Generally speaking, live, play-by-play sports commentators provide backstory, observations, and accordingly, interpret an athlete/team's inner state in real-time. See, for instance, how C1 contextualizes Uta Abe's facial expression at the time of her victory (found at 2:35.25 in the abovementioned clip): **See Fig 1.**

During this comment, Abe's mixed (smiling/crying) facial expression appears twice on the screen (where the transcript is bolded). When it first appears, C1 speeds up by connecting her two sentences without pause ("her=you"), emotionalizing Abe's real-time actions while the visual reference is still fresh among viewers (or accessible, as it ends up appearing again).

However, C1's comment is not only about this particular moment; it packages the larger scale of Abe's emotional journey — "so much pressure" that she must have experienced in her past few years — into this momentary facial expression. Indeed, the work of emotionalizing may connect the audience to multiple points of emotional states that athletes supposedly go through.

Going back to a moment before Abe wins, there is a scene where her competitor, Amandine Buchard, comes out of a tackle made by Abe. The camera briefly catches Buchard's facial expression that may indicate concern or nervousness (2:30.02). Nine seconds later (2:30.11), C1 labels it as a state of being "startled": **See Fig 2.**

C2 had been talking during the 9 seconds prior, so it is natural that C1's observation was offered in a later turn. Yet, this "delay" achieves something else. It is precisely 9 seconds later — where the referred expression disappears and Buchard has re-oriented herself to the game — that it becomes possible for C1 to retrospectively interpret the expression and contextualize it around her current state of having "calmed down"; being "startled" is no longer a negative affair, but acts as the evidence for the claim that "she is mentally very tough". Buchard's process of composing herself would not have been embodied in the same way had C1 commented on the initial "startled" expression separately, as it was happening.

The athlete's (constructed) emotional state can also be prolonged with live commentary. Immediately after the above mentioned match was the gold medal contest of Uta Abe's brother, Hifumi Abe and Vazha Margvelashvili. The already-crowned Olympic champion sister watches from the sidelines, and the camera catches her smile in the middle of it (2:38.15 & 2:38.17).

A few seconds after the smile was on the screen, C1 emotionalizes it (2:38.19): **See Fig 3.**

Abe's smile is long gone from the viewers by the time C1 finishes her comment, and C1 slows her delivery and uses a falling intonation at the end, which could suggest the topic closure. However, C2 immediately latches on and re-topicalizes the smile (2:38.33): **See Fig 4.**

C2 not only revives Abe's constructed emotion, but upgrades it with the adjective, "massive". This renewed assessment creates room for C1 to react to and revisit its meaning (Abe is not just relaxed, she is "so" relaxed), which is picked up by C2, who adjusts it by emphasizing the "now"-ness of Abe's relaxed state (in further contrast to her previous state). While these additional comments could well be a way of filling time while waiting for next "comment-able" moment, the prolonged topicalization gives space for the commentators to co-develop the meaning: from a smile of a relaxing sister, to a massive smile, to the kind of smile we viewers can only witness after someone has won an Olympic gold medal.

In one hand, emotionalizing athletes is about "what", e.g. interpreting — or creating — emotions in athletes (which begs the question for another discussion: just how do live commentators socialize audience with what athletes ought to feel or not?). On the other hand, it is also about "when". Emotionalization may be done on the spot, delayed, prolonged or revived, often packing multiple time-scales into a momentary action, such as a glimpse of a facial expression of an athlete. Such embodied temporalities provide audiences with various sense-making tools to experience the athletes' emotional journey — regardless of it being discovered or constructed.

Figure 1

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C1: she is (.) a world champion at the age of eighteen and at the age
    of twenty-one (.) she is no:w (0.2) the Olympic champion. (0.5)
    there's been so much pressure on her=you can see it on her face.
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Figure 2

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C1: when she came out of that=you could just see a little bit of (0.3)
    a startled face?=but she immediately calmed herself down, she is
    mentally very tough, Buchard.
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Figure 3

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C1: his sister is smiling=his sister is watching on,=she: (.) can
    re-h-la-hh-x because she already (0.3) h-kno-h-ws that she is the
    Olympic champion (0.6) can they get <a second (.) family (.) gold
    medal (0.5) in this session.>
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Figure 4

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C2: >°yea°<, mA:ssive smile fr[om um, (.) Uta there, and um (.)
C1:                            [hehehehehehe
C2: she is ( [    )
C1:          [she is so relaxed
C2: oh y[eah-hh she is now
C1:     [hehehehe what a difference a gold medal makes
C2: she is now
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