



FOCUS ON COACH TALK

HOW DO BOXING COACHES COMMUNICATE IN
BREAKS BETWEEN ROUNDS ON FIGHT NIGHT?

UNPACKING TALK IN SPORT:

CASE STUDY ANALYSES OF COMMUNICATION IN HIGH-PERFORMANCE SPORT
BY THE SPORTS CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION RESEARCH COLLECTIVE

AUTHORSHIP AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This booklet was put together by the Sports Culture and Communication Research Collective as part of our research into *communicating under pressure* in high performance sporting contexts. The team are:

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www.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/research/groups/sccrc/

This information booklet would not have been possible without the help of a number of important institutional bodies and people.

Firstly, we would like to express our thanks to the team at England Boxing, particularly Amanda Coulson, Andrea Rankine and David Thornley, for supporting the project and the coaches for providing us with the data we needed to build this resource.

Special thanks also to Alan Rapley and UK Coaching for facilitating this project and driving data collection.

This project would not have been possible without the funding provided by the Economic & Social Research Council (grant reference ES/T502054/1). These funds provided through the Impact Acceleration Account have helped us turn our research findings into an impact opportunity for England Boxing's coaches.

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Photography courtesy of Andy Chubb, England Boxing

BACKGROUND TO THIS BOOKLET

OUR PURPOSE: EXPLORING TALK *BY* BOXING COACHES *FOR* BOXING COACHES

As Applied Linguists, we study *how people talk* in different walks of life. By shining a light on how people talk we can identify patterns of social interaction in specific contexts (or situations) and make these available for closer attention. The Sports Culture and Communication Research Collective is particularly interested in how sports professionals use language when interacting in their high-performance sporting contexts. By shining a light on patterns of talk used by coaches, athletes, administrators, physios, engineers and other sporting stakeholders, we aim to help sports professionals develop greater awareness of and critically evaluate their own communicative practices.

We are particularly interested in studying contexts where there is pressure on the communicators, as, in these situations, capacity to be thoughtful, considered and strategic with one's communication can be challenged. By unpacking communication in such contexts, we aim to raise awareness of the patterns that speakers tend to rely on in these high-pressure situations and make these visible for those we are researching, to help facilitate more direct, critical and reflective attention.

Our case study in this book: talk by boxing coaches on fight night

As part of our continuing work in this area, in this booklet we apply our linguistic lens to the sport of boxing, focusing particularly on talk between coaches and their boxers on fight night. While a lot of important work goes into preparing boxers for bouts, the actual bout is the moment where the rubber meets the road - where the boxer tests themselves in authentic competition. These moments are likely to be where boxers and their coaches feel the most pressure, making communication on fight night a useful target for our linguistic lens.

The communication encounter we are particularly interested in this booklet is the *one-minute break between-rounds* during boxing bouts. In these encounters, coaches and boxers assemble in their corner of the ring, reflect on the round just completed and prepare for the round to come. This is one of the main communication encounters on fight night. However, it is also one that is constrained by time pressure. In this booklet, we identify the tasks or goals coaches perform through language in these time-pressured encounters and unpack the language choices coaches make to perform these tasks or goals.

How do we work

For applied linguists, authentic language use is our data. We start by collecting examples of *authentic communication* from the encounter we are studying. The encounters we focus on may be important ones for a given sport, they may be ones where people are wishing to improve, or they may be ones where people are having difficulty. We work together with sporting bodies to identify relevant encounters and then apply our theories and tools to help unpack how language is being used.

We then analyse these examples for patterns in the way language is used. This process doesn't involve the mere counting of words in isolation. The frequency of word choices only provides some insight. What we are more interested is what people are *doing* with their language (the social or interpersonal *functions* they perform through language) and the linguistic styles and *strategies* they exhibit as they perform these important functions.

In this booklet, we identify the *functions* that coaches appear to perform in the one-minute breaks between rounds and look at the *strategic choices* coaches make when they design talk to achieve these functions. The latter of these goals can involve paying attention to different styles speakers adopt as they choose vocabulary items and other linguistic features from the wider language system to shape their messages. We can also locate patterns in the way body language and non-verbal cues are deployed in the formation of messages.

Phase 1: our goals in this booklet

Our goal in the first phase of our analyses is usually to provide a survey of typical practices we see in the data, in this case the typical practices of coaches in these one-minute between-round encounters. We attach labels to these practices – labels that help to encapsulate the communicative functions, actions and goals boxing coaches perform in their talk between rounds.

The primary outcome of this first phase is to provide boxing coaches with a framework to be able to speak about their communication and drive their own reflective processes. By laying out a set of concepts, labels, processes and observed phenomena, we can facilitate the reflection processes and help coaches build awareness about communication practices on fight night.

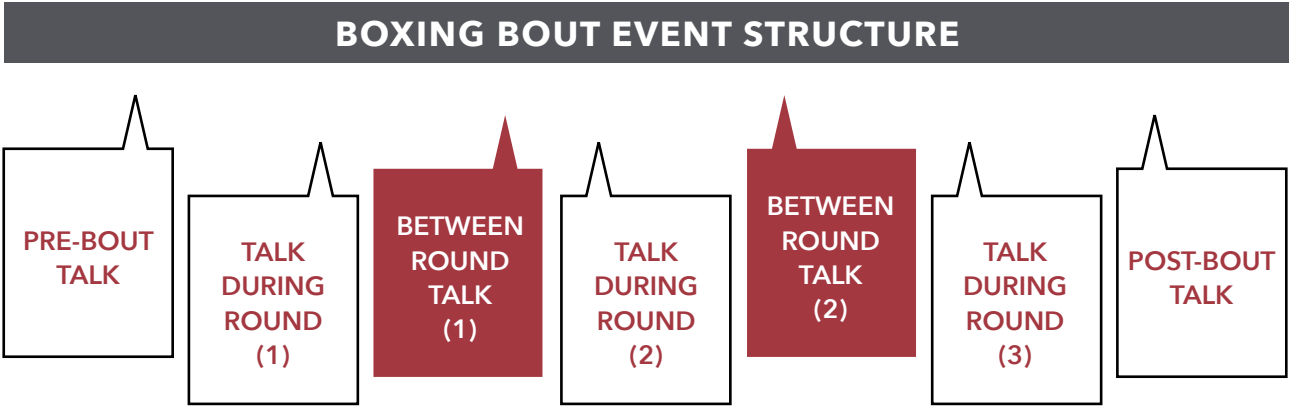
Important point: this is not a ‘how to’ booklet. We do not set out to tell boxing coaches how to communicate between rounds. We enjoy engaging in critical conversations about language use in sporting contexts, but we prefer to do this together with stakeholders in workshops with coaches that allow us to bring our expertise together.

Our audience

This booklet has been prepared specifically for boxing coaches who are under the auspices of England Boxing but will hopefully serve as a useful reflective tool for boxing coaches at any level of competition. For young and inexperienced coaches, the material in this booklet offers a detailed look at what experienced coaches do in and through their talk during these between-round breaks. For more experienced coaches, we hope the material offers an opportunity to reflect on their own practices and helps to broaden the base of strategies they use to perform key functions of coaching in between rounds.

Overall, we hope that the unpacking work we do in this booklet will help coaches to communicate with their boxers in more conscious and considered ways, ensuring that they are helping their boxers develop their skills and stay safe in the process.

TALK ON FIGHT NIGHT:
A BRIEF OVERVIEW



When do we see talk?

From our data, talk is used to perform a lot of coaching tasks at every stage of a boxing bout. Coaches spoke before the bout began, as the bout was in progress, after the bout concluded and in the one-minute break between rounds that we are focusing on in this booklet.

Who talks?

The boxers do talk at these different stages of a boxing bout, but usually only when asked to. Talk on fight night was dominated by boxing coaches. The rights or responsibility to talk and perform tasks with talk was claimed by the boxing coach. This might be because the boxer was pre-occupied and focused on performing.

What do coaches do with their talk on fight night?

This means the coaches exclusively perform a number of key fight night tasks: instilling confidence, getting the boxer comfortable, motivating and focusing the boxer, diagnosing issues, finding ways to adjust technique, maintaining good technique and encouraging a performance over outcome focus. Many of these tasks would be harder to achieve without talk and therefore the way they shape these tasks in and through talk is an important concern for coaches.

FUNCTIONS OF TALK PRE-BOU T, DURING ROUND AND POST-BOU T

<p>Functions of pre-bout talk:</p> <p>Pre-bout talk appears to function to PREPARE the boxer’s equipment for the bout, PRESENT the boxer with their key goals and PUMP UP the boxer before the battle.</p>	<p>Functions of during-round talk:</p> <p>During-round talk appears to function primarily to ENCOURAGE the boxer during the bout, and to GUIDE for the boxer to apply to the ongoing bout.</p>	<p>Functions of between-round talk:</p> <p>Between-round talk appears to function to REFLECT on the performance of the previously completed round and FOCUS the boxer on improvements and adjustments for the upcoming round.</p>	<p>Functions of post-bout talk:</p> <p>Post-bout talk appears to function to briefly REFLECT on the bout, focusing particularly on the performance.</p>
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Photography courtesy of Andy Chubb, England Boxing

OVERVIEW: UNPACKING TALK IN THE BREAKS BETWEEN ROUNDS

HOW MANY FUNCTIONS DO BOXING COACHES PERFORM IN SIXTY-SECONDS?

Boxing coaches achieve a lot in sixty seconds. In our data, we identified five recurring functions boxing coaches performed between rounds. Figure 1 below captures these functions and the way they typically progress across the sixty seconds. We unpack each function and the range of strategies coaches draw on in the following sections.

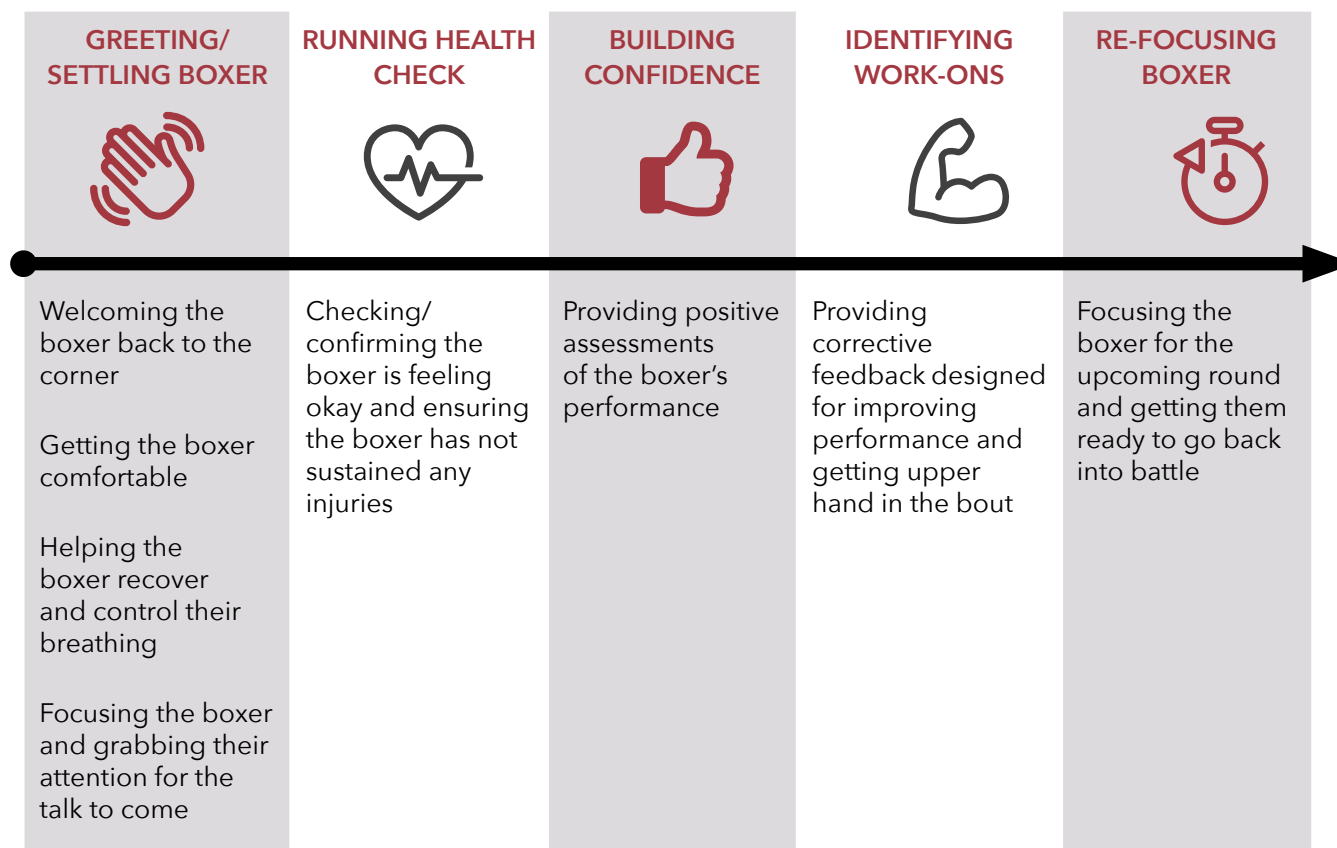


Figure 1: breakdown of the key functions of talk in between-round interactions



What do you think of these five functional labels?
Do they feel appropriate or would you label them differently?



GREETING/SETTLING THE BOXER

The opening steps of these talks perform a range of important preliminary and practical tasks to help manage the boxer's recovery and prepare them to take on feedback. It turns out, coaches do a lot at the beginning of these between-round talks. We break down these different tasks below.

Welcome the boxer back to the corner

The first thing a boxing coach does in these one-minute chats is greet the boxer and welcome them back to their corner. They've been out boxing, but now they are back in close quarters with their support crew.

As the boxer returns to their corner, they are likely to be on alert to your reactions, as their coach. The data suggest that boxing coaches use the greeting to establish an atmosphere of solidarity with the boxer. Greetings in our data were always positive. Coaches welcomed the boxer's back using their name and/or a term of endearment like lad, son, mate or boy. Coaches also performed this strategy non-verbally, by patting boxers on the head, or putting their arm around their shoulders.

These greetings function to build solidarity and ensure the boxer does not get the impression that the coach is disappointed with them, regardless of the way the round has gone. It also sets the tone for the chat to come and may help to bridge the interpretation gap boxers engage in when faced with critical feedback. Whether a boxer interprets feedback as criticism of them or constructive is likely to depend on the culture a coach has established. However, these positive reinforcing greetings also help to set the tone for your interactions with them.

“

Good boy Stuart nice
Good boy
Nice
Good boy
Good boy lovely
Good boy Fred very nice

Good well done very nice
Good boy
Good start Charlotte
Good start
Good boy
Very nice Bryan son
Good boy very nice

That's all right madam
Nice Phillip good lad
Well done mate
Good boy
Well done Madame
Nice Stuart

”



Do you put any strategic work into greeting your boxers when they return to the corner after a round?

Get the boxer comfortable

The coach also dedicates time to making sure the boxer is comfortable and recovering in the short amount of time they have available. This included a range of actions from getting their legs in a comfortable position, adjusting their safety equipment and removing their gum shield so they can take on water.

Gimme your
gum shield

Get your
legs out

Do you want
me to tilt this a
little bit?

Spit this first
one out for me

Move your legs
up give yourself
some room

Help the boxer recover and control their breathing

Coaches also encouraged their boxers to engage in breathing exercises in the early stages of these between-round talks. These breathing exercises are clearly an opportunity to help the boxer catch their breath and relax after the round. However, as a part of the opening sequence, these exercises also functioned to settle the boxer and get them ready for the upcoming interaction with their coach.

“

Take deep breaths for me

Take deep breaths

Big breaths for us

Relax, that's it, control
your breathing

Control that breathing,
good

Nice deep breaths

There you go that's it,
two more, one more

Breathe breathe breathe

Suck it up

Take deep breaths for me,
and again and again

And breathe normally ”

Grab the boxer's attention for the remainder of the talk

There was also usually direct action taken to focus the boxer and grab their attention. This usually happened after boxers had begun their breathing exercises and functioned to signal the beginning of the feedback sequence. Boxers, having just been engaged in physical exertion, are likely to still be absorbed in the battle and may be processing the round themselves. These explicit attempts to grab the boxer's attention may be an acknowledgement of this.

Head up

Look at me

Listen

FOCUS ON: ADDRESSING YOUR BOXERS

We found some interesting variation in the way coaches addressed their boxers. As the examples below illustrate, **BOY** and **MATE** were the most common address terms coaches used (as well as using the boxer's first name).

BOY

“

Good **BOY** Stuart here we go you put it where you want it we'll get it fastened at the bottom remember what I said about this confident start to the round

Good **BOY** Stuart nice how we feeling?

Got it good **BOY** good **BOY** big breaths suck it up suck it up

Good **BOY** listen doing well there good **BOY** just just spit your gum-shield out for me

Good **BOY** you feel good you feel alright?

Keep working him Charlie keep working him good **BOY** start again Charlie head ”

MATE

“

Zach go again **MATE** yes lovely shot

That's it keep it tidy **MATE** nice tidy boxing nice shot Greg

Good Greg work out work out let's go **MATE** let's go finish it off **MATE**

That's it **MATE** you got that back lead foot remember good Greg don't let him get control of his lead foot

Let's go pick up **MATE** yes Greg good shot ”



While both 'boy' and 'mate' are terms of endearment, are there any differences or conditions for use of these two address terms? In other words, do these choices have any significance (i.e. to the boxer, perhaps)?





RUNNING A HEALTH CHECK

Coaches also ran a brief and basic health check with their boxers typically to gauge how their physical and/or mental state. How was this health check typically performed?

Coach
Feeling all right?

Boxer
Yeah all good

Coach
You're not hurt?

Boxer
(Boxer shakes his head)

Coach
How are you?

Boxer
Do you think I won that round?

Coach
Yeah

Coach
Everything alright?

Boxer
Yeah

Coach
Good boy

Coach
How are you feeling?

Boxer
Alright

Coach
You okay?

Boxer
Yeah

Coach
How we feeling?

Boxer
Alright

Coach
Good

Coach
You feel good + you feel alright?

Boxer
Yeah

Coach
Yeah? Strong?

Early in these between-round breaks, the coach also often inquired about the boxer's physical and/or mental state. This was typically one of the only exchanges the boxer and the coach had, with the remainder of the between round talk dominated by the coach. It was often performed through a simple question like 'how are you', which was also quite general and did not target a specific topic or state (mental or physical). Boxers always responded positively and did so quickly.



The Health Checks were more frequent after the first round than after the second round. Does that mean these "how are you" checks are less about assessing health issues and more about checking if the boxer is settling into the bout?



TALKING UP THE BOXER: BUILDING CONFIDENCE

The bulk of the time in these talks was dedicated to providing an account of the recently completed round. This included both highlighting positive aspects of performance to boost a boxer’s confidence and identifying work-ons and adjustments to technique for the upcoming round.

Characteristics of positive feedback messages in between-round talks

- Positive feedback was usually given early on in these between-round talks
- It was often used as a quick springboard for then offering more critical feedback
- Messages of positive feedback were often very general (“that was a good round”; “you’ve done well”), particularly in comparison to the more critical work-on messages
- Messages sometimes cited areas of dominance boxers had over their opponents
- Messages can be strengthened (“fantastic”, “really good”) but are usually designed in quite moderate ways (“a good round”).

Strength and Amount of positive commentary

Offering positive feedback to boxers was obviously an important task of these one-minute between-round talks. However, in our analysis, we noticed there was considerable variation in the **amount** and **strength** of positive commentary given by coaches in these between-round interactions. We have mapped out examples of this variation in the figure opposite.

Do the choices you make as coaches, about the AMOUNT and STRENGTH of positive commentary you give to a boxer, depend solely on the boxer’s performance in the round?

Or are there other factors that influence your choices?

What broader values underlie these decisions?



That was a really good round... you keep breathing for me... that’s a really really good round clever clever boxing, which is what was the key... when you use your feet really really well and you adjust your feet after you’ve punched... fantastic...

Same again... bully him... we keep on the front foot... we’re leading off nice and fast nice and sharp... too fast for him, right? As that round went on you got better and better... so keep this momentum going now... as soon as the second round starts...

Listen now... superb round when you got your distance right... you can box this kid’s lugs off... the only thing I need...

Okay... listen... very very good right... okay... really pleased with that... now you’ve gotta...

So... that was a good round there [name] exactly what we said... stayed sharp and you’ve done well... the only thing...

Doing well there, good boy... just just spit your gum-shield out for me... nice work... listen...

Listen... good start... I liked that... it’s a good start... just...

That wasn’t a bad round at all was it? Yeah? Now real key here is...

You did really really good... listen...

Okay... all the right things are there [name]... we just need to...

That was a good round...



HIGH

AMOUNT AND STRENGTH OF POSITIVE COMMENTARY

LOW



TALKING THROUGH WORK-ONS

Identifying work-ons was the most important purpose for talk in breaks between rounds. The bulk of coach talk was concerned with providing corrective feedback and encouraging changes to technique and performance for the upcoming round. But how did coaches talk through work-ons?

Strategies coaches deployed when shaping work-on talk

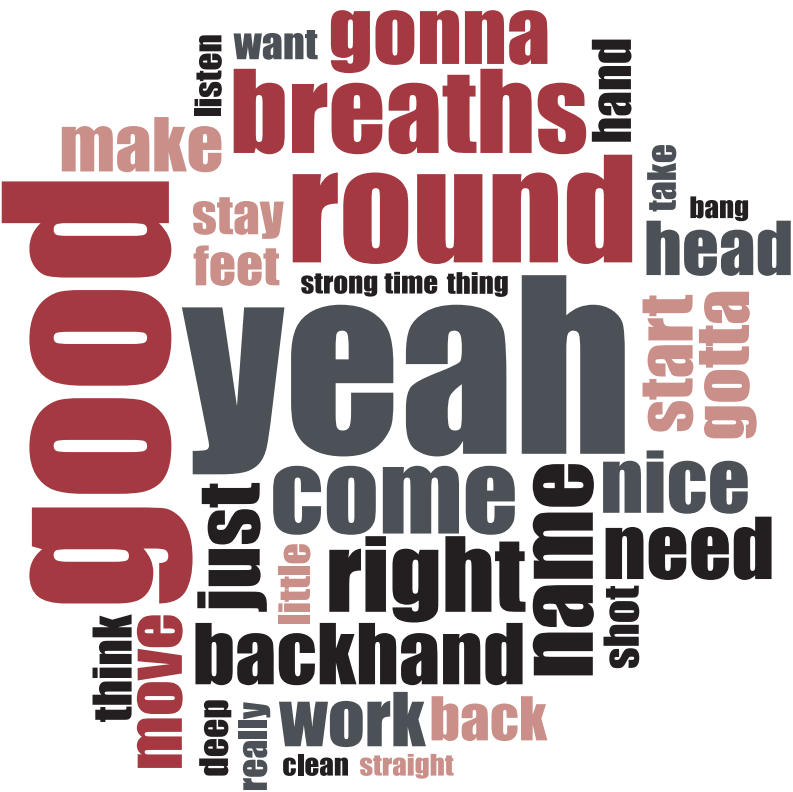
Work-on talk was performed in many different ways as coaches drew on different strategies when providing corrective feedback and encouraging their boxers to make adjustments to their technique. We have located and illustrated nine of these strategies below.

POSITIVE FRAMING	CREATING HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIOS	GIVING WARNINGS
<p><i>Okay, all the right things are there, Kate, we just need to be a little bit tighter when we get in there on the inside.</i></p> <p><i>You're doing well, you just need to get that little bit more engaged on this just that half a step.</i></p>	<p><i>If you wait too long, it's going over to her because she's waiting to try and pick you off. If you dictate the pace, you're gonna have more success.</i></p>	<p><i>What you need to be mindful of is if he throws a punch at that point and catches you yeah?</i></p>
RECOUNTING ERRANT ACTIONS	IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES	DRAWING ON TROPES
<p><i>You're backing off a little bit and kind of waiting for your breath.</i></p> <p><i>You're getting caught with sloppy punches.</i></p>	<p><i>When you spin off, that's your chance. Go straight back in and hit him again and then move off.</i></p>	<p><i>Don't get in a fight, just box him. Clean make it clean.</i></p>
ISSUING REMINDERS	APPEALING TO THE BOXER'S ABILITIES	CONSTRUCTING A WINNING FORMULA
<p>COACH: <i>You're backing off a little bit and kind of waiting for your breath. What did we say earlier?</i></p> <p>BOXER: <i>Move off and work.</i></p> <p>COACH: <i>Yeah, yeah 100% man, it'll work.</i></p>	<p><i>Do me one favour, don't stand and trade with him, you don't need to. You're too good for that.</i></p> <p><i>I think you're letting him off a little bit at times. Just go again straight after and move off to the sides a bit more rather than just back.</i></p>	<p>COACH: <i>Backhand hook and you're winning the fight. Yeah? Tell me how you win the fight.</i></p> <p>BOXER: <i>Backhand hook.</i></p> <p><i>Whether you come in and out with your feet and the straight line off the angle, it doesn't bloody matter. This is gonna work. Understand?</i></p>

Getting your message across

When performing work-on talk, coaches also drew on additional strategies when shaping their feedback messages to try and ensure their boxers were processing and paying attention to the message. This was important due to the number of distractions boxers need to deal with during a bout.

BOOSTING INTENSITY OF DIRECTIVES	ELICITING COMPREHENSION AND UNDERSTANDING	MARKING EMPHASIS
<p><i>You make sure you start to put the punches together in combinations.</i></p> <p><i>Make sure your feet travel with you don't stay in front too long, you're getting caught with sloppy punches on the way out, you're scoring but make sure you're reacting to what's coming back.</i></p>	<p>COACH: <i>Which way we gonna move eh? After we've punched .</i></p> <p>BOXER: <i>Right.</i></p> <p>COACH: <i>We're gonna move right. We're gonna keep away from his backhand, aren't we? Good boy.</i></p>	<p><i>One thing I want you do when you're on the ropes, when you come close, turn yourself round and take yourself back into the middle.</i></p> <p><i>The only thing I need you to think about when you go in punch really fast adjust your feet and be ready to come back fast.</i></p>



Key words in work-on talk

Coaches repetitively drew on key verb constructions to shape their work-on talk. The verb construction **GOTTA** (got to), the verb **NEED** and the negative verb operator **DON'T** were particularly frequent. We have compiled examples in the tables below.

GOTTA

“

- You **GOTTA** set him up with that backhand
- The head movement has **GOTTA** be consistent this round right
- You **GOTTA** keep that head movement up right
- You’ve **GOTTA** draw the shot from him
- The only thing we’ve **GOTTA** try not to do this round is admire your punches
- You **GOTTA** get that backhand off, that’s the trick

”

NEED

“

- You **NEED** a big round you understand
- You **NEED** to take half a step out and go again
- You **NEED** to be really smart to look for them clean punches
- I **NEED** you to be really clever this round
- You **NEED** a big round
- So, what you **NEED** to do is come in with the shoulder
- You **NEED** a big round doing the same thing

”

A common strategy used by coaches when giving corrective feedback was to issue **DON'T** - fronted statements. These functioned to direct boxers to stop using a particular strategy, action or approach in order to improve their chances of winning the bout.

DON'T

“

- **DON'T STAY THERE TOO LONG**, double up your attacks
- **DON'T JUST PUNCH AND ADJUST AND WAIT**, punch and be ready, and if he comes, hit him
- Instead of trying to unload early doors get there and get the first attack in. **DON'T UNLOAD TOO EARLY**, double jab then go
- **DON'T GO TOE TO TOE** with him
- **DON'T LOAD UP** just let your shots flow
- **DON'T GET CLOSE** cause he’s getting really arsey about your head

”

?

Sports psychologists often speak about the importance of being positive and using positive communication strategies.

With this in mind, is the use of ‘don’t’-fronted statements by coaches problematic?

Or are they necessary coaching tools?

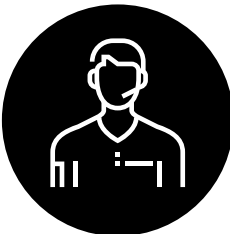




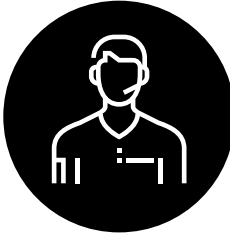


RE-FOCUSING THE BOXER

Coaches signed off their between-round talks with a range of actions designed to re-focus the boxer and send them back primed and ready for the next round. How were these final messages designed?

What was the last thing boxing coaches said or did before their boxers went back into the ring?


Below are the last messages six different coaches gave to their boxers before they got back into the ring. Are there any patterns in the way language is being used across these different attempts to re-focus the boxer?

<div><p>COACH 1</p></div> <div><p>R1: "Clever boxing, using your feet and stepping off to the right, okay? Good boy"</p><p>R2: "Come on son, make sure. He's gonna come at ya here yeah? Make sure. Clever clever"</p></div>	<div><p>COACH 2</p></div> <div><p>R1: "Start landing, start working. From the minute the bell goes"</p><p>R2: "Stay more engaged stay focused"</p></div>
<div><p>COACH 3</p></div> <div><p>R1: "Good boy. Let's go pal."</p><p>R2: "One big push, one big last push. You can take this mate. C'mon!"</p></div>	<div><p>COACH 4</p></div> <div><p>R1: "Don't change anything"</p><p>R2: "Don't get in a fight, just box him, clean make it clean"</p></div>
<div><p>COACH 5</p></div> <div><p>R1: "Roll that jab out, go again, yeah? Go again"</p><p>R2: "It's down to you to win it now, yeah? Good lad"</p></div>	<div><p>COACH 6</p></div> <div><p>R1: "Up you get son, stay sharp for me"</p><p>R2: "Up ya get, one more one more good round this one. Stay nice and sharp"</p></div>

Characteristics of re-focusing talk

Coaches would draw from a range of different strategies to shape and perform these final re-focusing moves, including:

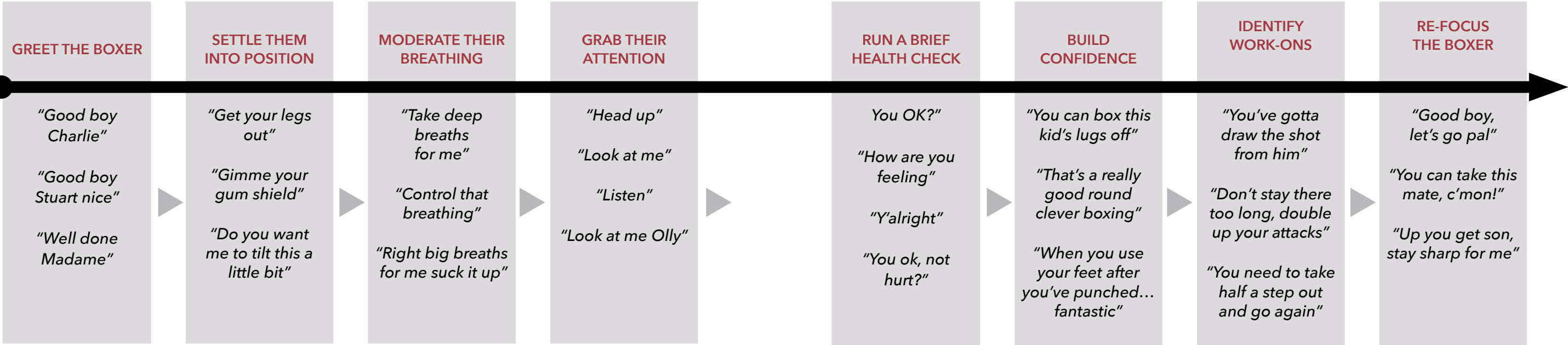
DRAWING ON SHORTHAND CONCEPTS THAT ENCODE A RANGE OF IMPORTANT BEHAVIOURS	▶	"clever boxing"
IMPLORING WITH THE BOXER TO SWITCH ON AND CONCENTRATE	▶	"stay focused"
PROVIDING BRIEF SUMMARIES OR REMINDERS TO TAKE WITH THEM	▶	"roll that jab out"
PROVIDING POSITIVE ASSESSMENTS	▶	"good lad"
INDICATING THAT THEY HAD BELIEF IN THE BOXER	▶	"you can take this mate"
STATING OR SUMMARISING THE TASK AHEAD OR THEIR EXPECTATIONS ON THE BOXER	▶	"one more good round"
ENCOURAGING OR MOTIVATING THE BOXER	▶	"let's go pal"
APPLYING PRESSURE	▶	"it's down to you to win it now"



How important is this final slot in between-round talks?

How do you want your boxer feeling as they go back into battle and how do you try to achieve this?

REFLECTION TASK: CONSIDER YOUR OWN PRACTICES?



Reflection questions

- In your opinion or experience, which of these stages are obligatory (or essential) and which are optional?
- Are there any stages missing?
- Does the order matter? Does the order help perform any important coaching goals?
- Do you perform these stages differently and will depend on the way the bout is going?
- Which stages do you find more difficult to manage and in what situations do you find them difficult to manage?

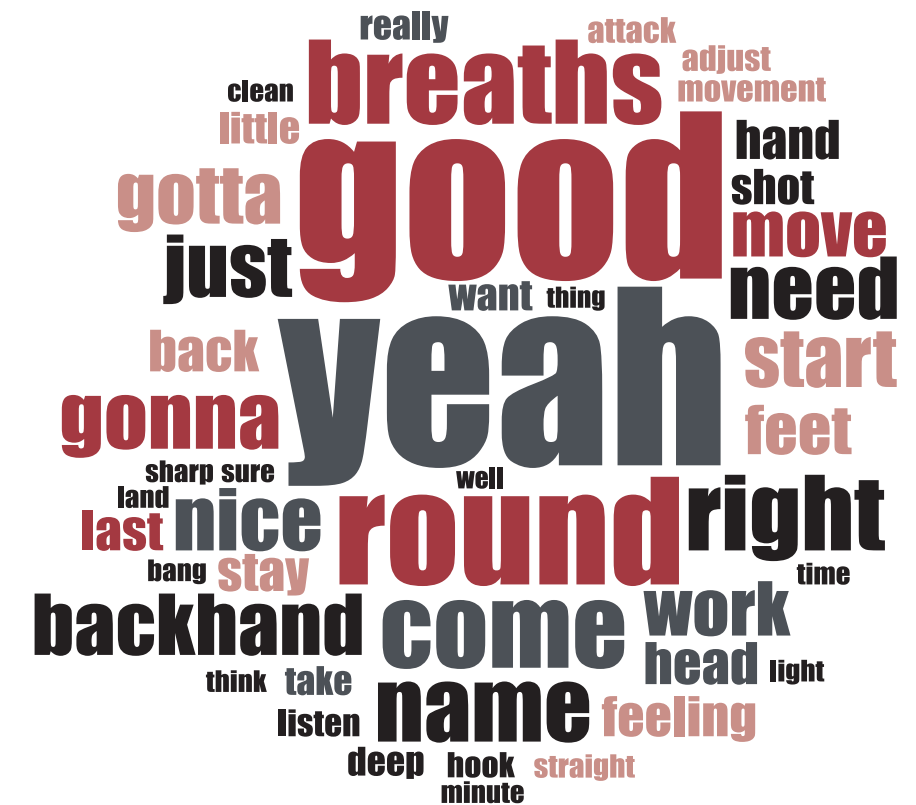


Photography courtesy of Andy Chubb, England Boxing



FOCUS ON WORDS

WHY ARE "YEAH" AND "GOOD" THE MOST FREQUENTLY USED WORDS BY COACHES?



Above is a word cloud that collates the most frequently used words by coaches in these one-minute breaks between rounds. The bigger the words, the more frequently they are used. The words that come up the most are “yeah” and “good”. This may be due to the fact that these words can perform a number of functions in talk between rounds. We look further at how these commonly used words are deployed in between-round talk.

YEAH

"YEAH" has multiple functions including question tagging like "Feeling alright, **YEAH?**" or "Breathe, suck it up, **YEAH?**". The rising intonation grabs the attention of the boxer and helps the coach to re-focus the boxer. "Yeah" is further used to signal a change in topic for example moving from running a health check to encouraging work-ons: "one more good lad ... right ... **YEAH** ... so what you gonna do". Here, it works as a filler that allows the boxer to follow the coaches' train of thought and move to another stage of the between-round talk.

GOOD

Coaches overwhelmingly used positive language when speaking with the boxers, with "good" being a clear example of this. The most common usage is in combination with a noun like "**GOOD** boy/girl/lad" or "**GOOD** round/start". Coaches here address the boxers using a friendly tone and emphasise positives. Similar to "yeah", "good" is also used to mark the transition between topics like "control that breathing, good, that wasn't a bad round". Used like this, "good" both assures the boxer of having successfully completed the breathing exercise and signals to the boxer to move on to another stage such as being provided feedback.

Words like "good" are repeated and extra emphasis is added, for example "very **GOOD**" or "really, really **GOOD**" and, other more superlative words were used to communicate a particular attitude.



The word cloud on the left compiles the adjectives coaches drew on when shaping assessments of their boxer's performances. As this cloud suggests, "good" is a clear favourite amongst coaches. Is there any particular reason why this particular word would be an overwhelming favourite?

What does this choice say about the function of coach talk in these one-minute breaks between rounds?





FOCUS ON BODY LANGUAGE

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION: GOALS AND STRATEGIES

We identified a variety of non-verbal actions that coaches regularly performed in our data during these between-round talks. We have provided a list of these non-verbal actions below:

ACTIONS

- Kneeling down in front of boxer
- Initiating clear eye contact
- Maintaining eye contact
- Following the boxer's gaze
- Tapping boxer's feet
- Demonstrating heavy breathing
- Mimicking or demonstrating boxing technique (jab, high guard, footwork)
- Patting boxer's head-guard
- Slapping boxer's arm or shoulder
- Clapping hands
- Grabbing boxer's shoulders

These different actions helped coaches to perform important coaching functions and to do so in ways that saved time and managed the noisy and distracting environments boxers usually box in. Non-verbal actions were used to:

FUNCTIONS

- Create a connection with the boxer
- Grab and hold a boxer's attention amongst all the distractions
- Facilitate breathing rituals and get boxers into appropriate recovery positions
- Further emphasise any positive assessments and supportive comments
- Help establish a supportive environment for the talk
- Help convey tactical information and work-on talk in a noisy space



In your between-round talks, are you aware of the ACTIONS you frequently draw on?

What FUNCTIONS do they help you perform?

Are there any other non-verbal strategies you like to use?

TAKING A BROADER LOOK

CONSTRUCTING AN EFFECTIVE COACHING IDENTITY IN YOUR TALK BETWEEN ROUNDS



THE MOTIVATOR

- Use of positive emotive language
- Positive focus on both boxer ability and bout performance

"put a show on in this last round for me, you're looking a million dollars"

THE TEACHER

- Use of interrogatives (question forms) to encourage the boxer to learn and reflect on round

COACH: *"which way we gonna move after we've punched?"*

BOXER: *"Right"*

COACH: *we're gonna move right*

THE GUARDIAN

- Use of softer voice tone
- Use of reassuring language

"that's a really really good round, clever clever boxing, which is what was the key"

THE STRATEGIST

- Use of assertive language to direct the boxer
- "you've gotta draw the shot, hit him with the jab, feint when the shot comes, straight over it with the screw"*

Performing multiple aspects of your coaching identity

The analysis we have presented above has focused on some of the micro level features of talk that coaches rely on to perform important functions in between rounds. However, we can also use these findings to consider what these choices signal at a broader level, particularly in relation to the identity of boxing coaches in these between round talks. Because there are many different ways of performing these between-round talks, what do the strategies that are selected suggest to us about the identities coaches are constructing in and through their talks with boxers? Above are four often overlapping identities coaches appear to perform across the different stages of these between-round talks. Coaches can move seamlessly from guardian to strategist or teacher to motivator. In fact, all of the identities listed may be used during a single bout by the same coach.



What identities do you recognise?

Are there any you are particularly comfortable or uncomfortable with?

Constructing an effective leadership identity:
combining relational and transactional behaviours

Combining relational and transactional strategies is an important aspect of effective leadership. It helps the coaches to achieve their aims and to empower the boxers to perform their best. What are relational and transactional strategies and how are these deployed?

RELATIONAL STRATEGIES

Setting the right tone through motivation

Motivating and encouraging the boxers are relational strategies often displayed by the coaches.

[Name of boxer] remember, this is our place! Your time! There she is! There she is! Good start to the round! Come on [name of boxer]!

Go and enjoy it! And enjoy!

Good start! Good start!

YEAH, BEAUTIFUL GOOD LAD!

Good boy!

Yeah.

Good boy!

Brilliant finish! Well done [name of boxer]!

TRANSACTIONAL STRATEGIES

Giving clear instructions

Providing guidance, diagnosing issues, and finding ways to adjust the boxers' technique are examples of transactional strategies.

You're staying there a little bit too close

and you're maybe getting involved in a fight you don't need to be

because that's what he wants to do.

You're too smart for that. Use this round to be sensible.

Get your punches off long.

Adjust your feet and hit him again.

I need you to be really clever this round

Relational and transactional behaviours in action

RELATIONAL BEHAVIOURS

Good boy! Nice!

That's it!

Good boy
[name of boxer]!

That's good!

That's good!
That's nice!

Good boy!
That's nice!!

That's good!
That's a lovely
one-two hook!

Good boy!

TRANSACTIONAL BEHAVIOURS

Feet all about
your feet

Feet feet!

Hat!

Little adjustment!

All about your feet
[name of boxer]

Defend what comes
back defend what
comes back

Centre after
you've punched.
AFTER!



Reflecting on your own coaching identity, how do you combine relational and transactional strategies?

Is this different under time pressure?

What effect do you think this has on the boxers?



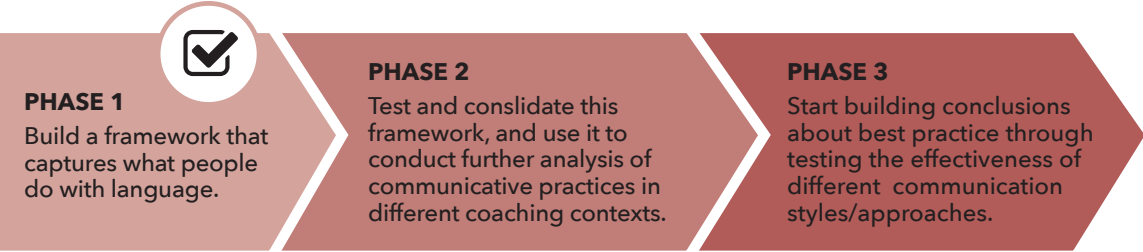
Photography courtesy of Andy Chubb, England

CLOSING REMARKS AND NEXT STEPS

In this book, our mission was to locate and present patterns in talk in the breaks between rounds of a boxing bout. We built a profile of the functions boxing coaches appeared to perform through talk and a range of linguistic strategies they employed when performing these functions. By locating these patterns, we hope we have helped to raise awareness of what coaches do with their language in these encounters and provide a point of reference for more critical reflection on communication by boxing coaches and their coach developers. More specifically, we hope it helps young and inexperienced coaches learn more about what experienced coaches do in and through their talk during these between-round breaks and helps more experienced coaches reflect on and build a broader base of strategies for performing key functions of coaching in between rounds.

Next steps: designing Phase 2

Now that we have built a framework through which to talk about communication by boxing coaches, we can begin to advance the conversation. Phase 2 of this project could test and consolidate this framework but also explore how the practices labelled in this booklet are deployed by coaches in different contexts. For example, do male and female coaches perform the stages of between-round communication in similar or different ways? Do experienced and inexperienced coaches vary in the strategies they deploy when building confidence or identifying work-ons. Are there identifiable patterns in the way coaches of winners or coaches of confident boxers deploy language in between-round talk? Or, are there ways boxer safety could be enhanced and more effectively confirmed in these one-minute talks? There are multiple opportunities to use this framework to advance this work and we look forward to planning Phase 2 together with stakeholders from within the sport of boxing.



Can you help us? Fill in a short feedback survey

If you are a boxing coach or if you work with boxing coaches and you have found this booklet informative, we would really like to hear from you. If you can spare a couple of minutes to tell us about any impact this book has had on your awareness or your communicative practices, please follow the link below to a short survey. Any data we can collect on the impact of our research is essential to helping us to continue to fund our work in this area.

🔗 warwick.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0CCWfM6A3YOFmDj

Alternatively, if you have questions, comments or observations about the content of this booklet, or any ideas about how to advance the work we have started, please contact the project lead (Dr Kieran File) at k.file@warwick.ac.uk.

More information?

For more information about the work the Sports Culture and Communication Collective do, please get in touch. You can access contact details along with resources, academic and practitioner presentations, and details about current and future projects on our website:

🔗 warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/research/groups/sccrc/

FURTHER READING

Interested in digging a bit deeper into some of our work? Below are a few of our recent academic publications that tackle the issue of language use in high-performance sporting contexts.

Schnurr, Stephanie, File, Kieran A., Clayton, Dan, Wolfers, Sol & Stavridou, Anastasia (In Press). *Exploring the processes of emergent leadership in a netball team. Providing empirical evidence through discourse analysis*. Discourse and Communication, 15(1).

File, Kieran A., & Schnurr, Stephanie (2020). *Towards an understanding of linguistic consultancy: How do linguists approach the task of evaluating sociolinguistic practice in consultancy sessions?* In Mullany, Luise (ed.), Professional Communication: Consultancy, Advocacy, Activism (pp. 291-310). Palgrave Macmillan.

File, Kieran A. and Wilson, Nick (2017) ***Adapting self for private and public audiences: the enactment of leadership identity by New Zealand rugby coaches in huddles and interviews***. In: van de Mierop, Dorien and Schnurr, Stephanie, (eds.) *Identity Struggles. Evidence from Workplaces around the World*. Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 321-337.

Wolfers, Solvejg, File, Kieran A. and Schnurr, Stephanie. (2017) *Just because he's black'. Identity construction and racial humour in a German U-19 football team.* Journal of Pragmatics, 112, pp 83-96. ISSN 0378-2166.

NOTES

[illegible]

🐦 @sportylinguists
🐦 @WarwickAppLing
🐦 @KieranFile

Please note the pictures in this booklet were taken before Covid restrictions were imposed.

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