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To Score or to Score a Goal: Transitivity in Football Match Reports

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the use and non-use of objects with six transitive verbs in a corpus of English football match reports. The verbs were selected on the basis of their frequency as well as their lexico-grammatical features of “footballness” and transitivity. The study suggests that object omission may not be as pervasive as hinted at in previous studies (e.g. Bergh and Ohlander 2016; Ruppenhofer and Michaelis 2010). Regarding potential reasons for object omission, it is uncovered that the football verbs *net*, *save*, *play* are more prone to object omission than the general verbs: *feed*, *create*, *take*. This is attributed to the strong attraction of the former to recurrent collocates such as *goal* and *ball*. This suggests that verbs used to report on unremarkable and canonical situations (to the game of football) more readily omit the object, albeit not on a general basis, as individual differences between the verbs also emerge.

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object omission; transitivity;
corpus linguistic methods

1. Introduction and Aims

This study takes a corpus linguistic approach to investigate the lexico-grammatical behaviour of transitive verbs frequently used in English football match reports. What sparked my interest in this topic was Bergh and Ohlander’s (2016) observation that objects are “often omitted with various football verbs”.¹ Against this backdrop, my aim is to investigate how often objects are omitted after transitive verbs in match reports. In other words, what is the proportion of examples where the object is kept, as in example (1), compared to where it is left out, as in (2)?

- (1) Digne lined up the free-kick and sweetly *struck the ball* over the wall ... (EFC)
- (2) Jonjo Shelvey *struck* over from 22 yards ... (AFCB)

The study also investigates to what extent frequency and lexico-grammatical factors may trigger the use or non-use of an object with a transitive verb, as with *struck* in (1)

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¹Bergh and Ohlander, “Iniesta Passed,” 26.

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and (2). An additional and related question is why situationally, syntactically and semantically inferable objects seem to be more easily omissible with some verbs, e.g. *struck* in (2), compared to others, e.g. *blocked* in (3).

(3) Mee then *blocked a goalbound effort* from Marko Arnautovic ... (BFC)

The material for the study is drawn from the English part of the English-Norwegian Match Report Corpus (ENMaRC), which contains online match reports from the English Premier League. In order to approach the material in a structured way, the part-of-speech tagged version of the corpus was used to get an overview of the data. This procedure revealed that verbs abound, and to get a more manageable and homogeneous dataset, a selection of transitive verbs to analyse further was made based on their frequency and semantic content/degree of “footballness”, i.e. transitive verbs that typically describe actions or events related to the game.

The choice of football language as the focus of attention is not accidental. As pointed out by Bergh and Ohlander:

most work on football language, English and other, remains to be done—a somewhat surprising state of affairs considering the present-day role of football as the global game as well as the world’s most widespread cultural phenomenon.²

Moreover, despite being such a widespread phenomenon, football can be seen as “a well-delimited special domain”,³ giving the language connected with its status as a “special language” in the sense of being a “semi-autonomous, complex, semiotic system [...] based on and derived from general language”.⁴

Previous studies have shown that football language—as part of a more general sports language—is highly interesting from a linguistic point of view, as there are several characteristics that set it apart from language in general, including lexis, syntax and phraseology.⁵ Indeed, although it does not exist in a world of its own, this language variety may be seen to represent a code “in which grammar and vocabulary are particular to a specific group”.⁶ It is therefore a fascinating object of study not only in a comparative perspective but also in its own right. This investigation will concern itself with British football language as represented in the sub-genre of online written match reports.

The article has the following structure: Section 2 outlines some relevant previous research on object omission in general and on object omission in football language in particular. Section 3 introduces the material and method used, including a description of the corpus and the data extraction procedure. Section 4 presents the analysis of the selected verbs’ transitivity in terms of frequency, while Section 5 discusses the conditions

²Bergh and Ohlander, “Free Kicks,” 41.

³Schmidt, “The Kicktionary,” 20.

⁴Sager et al., 68. Cabré’s (*Terminology*, 65) definition of special languages “refers to the subsets of language that are pragmatically characterized by three variables: subject field, type of user and type of situation in which communication takes place”, e.g. the language used in football match reports for fans or the language used in research papers on physics for physicists.

⁵e.g. Lavric et al., *The Linguistics of Football*; Bergh and Ohlander, “Free Kicks”; Bergh and Ohlander, “Iniesta Passed”; Callies and Levin, *Corpus Approaches to the Language of Sports*; Ebeling, “Hope for the Future.”

⁶Beard, *The Language of Sport*, 47.

of use of each verb in more detail. Finally, Section 6 sums up the main findings and offers some suggestions for future research before the concluding remarks.

2. Previous Research

Special languages are often found to adopt certain linguistic conventions, including “special syntactic features”.⁷ Indeed, Haegeman demonstrates that “special registers may represent non-core grammatical properties”,⁸ in her case pro-drop, i.e. non-overt pronominal subjects, in diary contexts in languages that are not generally associated with this phenomenon. Regarding the language of sports, Delin,⁹ for example, discusses linguistic characteristics of live commentary, the backbone of which “narrate the action”, but which also includes evaluation, elaborating and summarising. Of relevance to the written mode of football commentary, viz. match reports, vocabulary, ellipsis and non-canonical syntax, including *it*-clefts and passive constructions, are mentioned. Similarly, Beard lists the following characteristics of running sports commentary:¹⁰

- present tense
- omission of auxiliary *be*, omission of verb
- impersonal *it is*
- passives
- space adverbials
- deictics

Although the list of features typical of written football match reports may differ from the above, there is evidently some overlap, notably omission. The main focus of this study does indeed involve omission, albeit not verb omission as mentioned by Beard, but object omission with transitive verbs (or non-overt direct objects, reminiscent of subject pro-drop).

2.1. Football Verbs and Object Omission

The topic of object omission has received some attention in studies of match reports and football language.¹¹ This paper is inspired by Bergh and Ohlander’s study in particular, in which they demonstrate that football language is not only special by virtue of lexis, but also “by virtue of certain syntactic and semantic features to do with transitivity”.¹² In this connection, they discuss two areas, namely the omission of “contextually recoverable ‘football objects’” and the use of unconventional objects, e.g. human objects with *buy* and *play*. While my main focus is on the former area, some insights may also be gained regarding the latter, as *play* is one of the verbs that will be studied in some detail (see Section 5.3).

⁷Sager *et al.*, 182.

⁸Haegeman, 168.

⁹Delin, 40, 46, 56.

¹⁰Beard, 75.

¹¹E.g. Ruppenhofer and Michaelis, “A Constructional Account”; Ruppenhofer and Michaelis, “Frames”; Bergh and Ohlander, “*Iniesta Passed*.”

¹²Bergh and Ohlander, “*Iniesta Passed*,” 36.

The title of Bergh and Ohlander's paper contains an example of what they call a "typical feature of football language",¹³ namely the intransitive use of the verbs *pass* and *finish* in *Iniesta passed and Messi finished clinically*. The verbs' intransitive yet implicitly transitive use in this example results in a special football meaning of passing the ball and finishing the attack. Bergh and Ohlander find support for their claim that object omission can be seen as a special property of football language in Ruppenhofer and Michaelis' studies of genre-based argument omission.¹⁴ In their 2014 article Ruppenhofer and Michaelis state that "otherwise prohibited definite null complements are licensed in certain genres, e.g. [...] match reports" and give the following example from college football: "Juice Williams keeps [the ball]".¹⁵

It is interesting to note that when discussing object omissibility in match reports, all the examples in Ruppenhofer and Michaelis involve omission of the ball.¹⁶ This bias is further underpinned by the following observations:

"match reports invoke a specific set of conventional participants ([...] a ball [...])" (p. 165)

Omission is restricted to "a globally prominent referent: [...] the ball as the object of play"

(p. 167)

"There is [...] only one object of play", i.e. the ball (p. 167)

While Bergh and Ohlander agree that the ball is the prototypically omitted object, as attested by their list of verbs permitting omission of the ball, they also argue that "other omitted objects are equally conceivable, such as *shot* in connection with verbs like *clear* and *strike*",¹⁷ or *goal* in connection with verbs such as *score*, *net* and *miss*.¹⁸

Moreover, object omissibility is, according to Bergh and Ohlander, "a well-known aspect of some, but not all, transitive verbs".¹⁹ They illustrate this with two telling examples and ask the question why the direct object *the ball* is omissible with *pass*, as in *Iniesta passed [the ball] to Messi*, and not with *possess*, as in *Barcelona possessed the ball for 72% of the match*.

Linguists have debated the issue of why such omissions are licensed in some cases but not in others, and several explanations have been put forward. Brisson, for example, suggests that two conditions must be met: the grammatical licensing condition and the contextual licensing condition. The former requires that so-called "structure arguments" must be expressed, whereas "content arguments" can be left out.²⁰ A structure argument is defined as "an argument of a predicate in a verb's event structure"; the structure argument of e.g. *sweep* is said to be "the argument of the activity predicate" (x):²¹

sweep (x, y)

activity (x)

The second argument (y), which in Brisson's example is the floor on which the sweeping takes place, is not structurally required as it is viewed as a content argument. Thus, *sweep*

¹³Ibid., 20.

¹⁴Ruppenhofer and Michaelis, "A Constructional Account"; Ruppenhofer and Michaelis, "Frames."

¹⁵Ruppenhofer and Michaelis, "Frames," 58.

¹⁶Ruppenhofer and Michaelis, "A Constructional Account."

¹⁷Bergh and Ohlander, "Iniesta Passed," 27.

¹⁸Ibid., 29.

¹⁹Ibid., 22.

²⁰Brisson, 97.

²¹Ibid., 96.

is said to fulfil the grammatical licensing condition. Brisson's second licensing condition, viz. the contextual,

requires that an unexpressed object is understood in the context in which the sentence is uttered. This condition will be met if the class of possible objects for the verb is both limited and common enough that there's not much chance of misunderstanding if the object is left out. In most cases, this will be true if there is some "prototypical" object that is associated with the verb.²²

Using *sweep* as an example again, Brisson argues that this condition is met due to cleaning (and by extension sweeping) being shared by most people, with a shared set of objects used.²³ Other related approaches to object omissibility are discussed in Ruppenhofer and Michaelis.²⁴

Reference grammars of English point to contextual or situational clues,²⁵ or lexical idiosyncrasies of verbs,²⁶ as circumstances that may trigger omissions of this kind. Bergh and Ohlander seem to share Quirk et al.'s views in particular, as they claim that "object omission can only take place under the condition of recoverability, where contextual factors play a dominant role", including the "overall conceptual framework, or semantic sphere, characteristic of different subject fields",²⁷ such as football match reports. Ruppenhofer and Michaelis take this one step further in their claim that "grammatical restrictions on null complementation might interact with broader narrative conventions, in particular those of genre".²⁸ They take a constructional approach to genre-based omission conventions and argue that match reports represent a genre strongly associated with object omission. The omissions typical of match reports are "not only mutually identifiable to the speaker and hearer but also a current joint focus of attention, e.g. [...] the ball in the match-report genre".²⁹ Moreover, Ruppenhofer and Michaelis claim that "we find omissions only with predicates denoting canonical aspects of the game such as taking various kinds of kicks or headers".³⁰

Returning to Bergh and Ohlander's examples of *pass* vs. *possess* above, they observe the following as to the reason why *pass* readily permits object deletion:

converting *pass* from a transitive into an intransitive verb [...] is made possible by the football context. This may be compared with the unacceptability in general language of freely omitting the object of *pass* as a transitive verb.³¹

²²Ibid., 97.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ruppenhofer and Michaelis, "Frames," including selectional restrictions (Resnik) and Aktionsart (Rappaport Hovav and Levin), as well as Ruppenhofer and Michaelis' own theory. They suggest that "null-complementation affordances are not 'emergent' from discourse; rather they are licensed by an array of lexemes and constructions (including those indexed to genres)" (p. 59). However, they admit that they "are not trying to predict the null-complementation affordance in itself" (p. 64), as they believe that such a "prediction cannot be accurately made". They are rather concerned with the interpretation of the missing complement, or "frame element" in their terms, typically whether it is definite or indefinite.

²⁵Quirk et al.

²⁶Huddleston and Pullum.

²⁷Bergh and Ohlander, "*Iniesta Passed*," 25.

²⁸Ruppenhofer and Michaelis, "A Constructional Account," 158.

²⁹Ibid., 164.

³⁰Ibid., 169.

³¹Bergh and Ohlander, "*Iniesta Passed*," 26.

This suggests that “the football context” is stronger in the case of *pass* than in the case of *possess* in that the ball is more easily recoverable from the context with the former. This can be supported by corpus evidence: *pass* frequently collocates with *the ball*, possibly making it easier to drop, whereas *possess* never co-occurs with *the ball*, at least not in the ENMaRC. The noun *possession*, however, is a more natural choice to express this meaning, e.g. *have possession*, *(be) in possession*.

It is, however, interesting to note that object omission may not be completely ruled out with *possess* in a football context after all, since examples such as (4) are attested online.

(4) Barcelona *possessed* for two-thirds of the match and outshot Celta Vigo ...³²

As mentioned, Bergh and Ohlander assert that object omission is a typical feature of football language (as opposed to general language).³³ Similarly, Ruppenhofer and Michaelis claim that match reports are associated with object omission.³⁴ Yet no frequency data are presented to substantiate these claims. Admittedly, in their list of “football verbs with *ball* as the omitted object”, Bergh and Ohlander state that this happens with varying frequency.³⁵ However, in order to determine exactly how typical this feature is, a more systematic inspection of frequency of occurrence would be welcome. In the following, an attempt will be made to supply some insights as to how often objects are omitted in a football context. This will be a first step towards a more direct and systematic comparison with general language to be carried out in the future.

One of the aims of this study is thus to investigate how pervasive the feature of object omission in fact is with transitive verbs in football match reports. This will hopefully also lead to some insights as to why it is permissible with some verbs and less so, or not at all, with others. However, as was the case in Bergh and Ohlander’s study,³⁶ it lies outside the scope of this small-scale investigation to attempt a theoretical explanation for this phenomenon in general, as only a handful of verbs will be analysed to reflect the tendencies in a specialised text type (see Section 3.2).

3. Material and Method

3.1. The Corpus and Data Extraction

The English-Norwegian Match Report Corpus (ENMaRC) consists of football match reports from the English Premier League and the Norwegian *Eliteserie*, published online by the clubs themselves.³⁷ Since the focus here is on English verbs, the study draws on the Premier League part of the corpus only, for convenience referred to as the ENMaRC in the remainder of this article. The corpus contains match reports from four Premier League seasons (from 2016 to 2020), amounting to almost 2 million running words. The reports are organised in twenty-nine text files each representing

³²<https://xbet.ag/barcelona-vs-atletico-odds-picks-june-30/> [accessed 11 December 2020].

³³Bergh and Ohlander, “Free Kicks,” 15.

³⁴Ruppenhofer and Michaelis, “A Constructional Account.”

³⁵Bergh and Ohlander, “Iniesta Passed,” 26.

³⁶“[T]he idiosyncratic lexical constraints that seem to determine the relative propensity of football verbs to omit objects are clearly in need of further elucidation.” Bergh and Ohlander, “Iniesta Passed,” 37.

³⁷See Ebeling, “The Language of Football Match Reports”, for a more detailed account of the compilation of the ENMaRC.

Table 1. ENMaRC word list in AntConc, rank 1–12.

Rank	Frequency	Word
1	312,495	nn1
2	192,681	np1
3	171,051	ii
4	166,435	at
5	151,655	the
6	143,134	s
7	121,743	jj
8	93,420	vvd
9	91,069	to
10	65,674	at1
11	59,136	nn2
12	57,929	a

one club reporting on both the home and away matches of their respective teams. Although the amount of text produced by the journalists of each of the twenty-nine clubs differs substantially, this will be factored in when reporting on the proportion of object omission in Section 4.2. See Table A in the Appendix for an overview of the clubs and the number of word tokens in each text file.

The match reports were part-of-speech tagged with CLAWS7,³⁸ in this way facilitating the extraction of verbs. The tagged files were uploaded in the corpus concordancing tool AntConc and a wordlist was produced.³⁹ When opting for “show tags” (rather than “hide tags”) in the AntConc tag settings, both tags and words are listed, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that there is a bias towards nouns in the corpus, as the most frequently occurring tags are nn1 (singular common noun) and np1 (singular proper noun), followed by general prepositions, tagged ii. Further, the list shows a set of actual function words—*at*, *the*, *to* and *a*. For the purpose of this study the most interesting observation to be made is that past tense verbs (vvd) are ranked at number 8 with more than 93,000 occurrences. It should also be pointed out that the vvd-tag excludes the past tense forms of *be*, *have* and *do* (these have separate unique tags).⁴⁰ Based on the top end of the word list and a previous study reporting on the highly frequent use of past tense verb forms in the ENMaRC,⁴¹ it was decided that the analysis in the current study will concentrate on past tense forms only.

3.2. Delimitation of the Data

To further delimit the data, a list of the top 100 past tense verb types was extracted. These represent roughly 66% of the total number of verb tokens tagged as past tense in the corpus (61,417 out of 93,420).⁴² Among the top 100, seventy-nine have been used

³⁸The Constituent Likelihood Automatic Word-tagging System (CLAWS), developed at the University Centre for Computer Corpus Research on Language at Lancaster University, automatically assigns a part-of-speech tag to each word in a corpus.

³⁹Anthony.

⁴⁰For a full overview of the CLAWS7 tagset, see <http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/claws7tags.html>

⁴¹Cf. Ebeling, “Minutes of Action!”

⁴²Despite some obvious tagging errors, e.g. *united* and *wilfried* tagged as past tense verbs, and, not least, past participle forms tagged as vvd, I have chosen to operate with the original numbers produced to avoid manual scrutiny of all wrongly tagged and potentially ambiguous cases at this stage, including *tore* as a past tense verb or proper noun, *left* as a past tense verb, adjective or adverb. In the analysis proper, disambiguation was performed manually.

either mono- (e.g. *played*), di- (e.g. *made*), or complex transitively (e.g. *held*) in the current material, and are therefore potential objects of study in the current investigation. The remainder of the top 100 verbs are not found in transitive settings, and include intransitive verbs (e.g. *came*, *ran*), copular verbs (e.g. *became*, *seemed*) and catenatives (e.g. *began*) (see Table B in the Appendix for an overview of the top 100 verbs). Some of the transitive verbs can more readily be called “football verbs” than others, e.g. *saved* and *scored* vs. *drove* and *gave*, the latter two being intuitively more general purpose verbs in nature.

Frequency of occurrence plays an important role in corpus linguistics. For example, Stubbs argues that frequent words are frequent because they occur in “frequent phrasal constructions which express conventional pragmatic functions in text”.⁴³ Frequency will therefore be one of the parameters used in the selection of verbs for this study. In a bottom-up selection from the list of the seventy-nine transitive verbs, I chose to look more closely at two of the most frequent ones (*took* and *played*), two of the least frequent ones (*fed* and *netted*) and two in the middle (*created* and *saved*). Each pair consists of one intuitively general verb, used in everyday situations, and one intuitively football-related verb. The selected “football verbs” can all be related to Morris’ “tribal tactics” of football, i.e. what players can do with the ball.⁴⁴ While *played* can be considered a verb that embraces many events taking place on the pitch —i.e. several of these tribal tactics—*netted* and *saved* are more restricted and belong to the category “shoot and score” and “intercept and save”,⁴⁵ respectively. This framework is reminiscent of Jürgens’ *Geschehenstypen* (‘action types’) for football, as quoted in Müller,⁴⁶ three of which are “playing football”, “scoring a goal” and “stopping the ball”. These types are based on the “stereotypical and recurring action sequences that are determined by the rules of the game”.⁴⁷

The verbs analysed in the present study were thus picked on the basis of frequency, transitivity and meaning (including contextual meaning and tribal tactics or *Geschehenstypen*). The reason for this choice is that these factors may have an impact on a verb’s disposition for object deletion. The potential importance of frequency is outlined above, while transitivity is an important criterion since a verb has to be inherently transitive in order to permit object omission. Finally, context and situation within a subject field have been mentioned in the literature as important factors for object omissibility in general (see Section 2.1).

Table 2 gives an initial overview of the overall frequency of the six verbs tagged as vvd, as well as the (reduced) number of occurrences that will be used in the analysis in Sections 4 and 5. The number of occurrences that will be part of the analysis (rightmost column in Table 2) differs from the total number of occurrences extracted with AntConc for several reasons. The transitivity analysis proper will only be concerned with single-verb uses, which means that e.g. *played* in example (5) is included but not the phrasal verb *played out* in (6).

⁴³Stubbs.

⁴⁴Morris.

⁴⁵Ibid., 76, 83.

⁴⁶Müller, 73.

⁴⁷Ibid.

Table 2. Number of occurrences of the verbs (total and reduced).

Verb form	Total number of occurrences (raw)	Number of occurrences for analysis (raw)
<i>Netted</i>	235	235
<i>Fed</i>	239	238
<i>Saved</i>	435	410
<i>Created</i>	354	354
<i>Played</i>	1,131	743
<i>Took</i>	2,455	1,073

- (5) Stephens *played* a perfect, angled pass out of defence for the run of Ward-Prowse down the right ... (SFC)
- (6) Manchester United *played out* a goalless draw against Southampton in the Reds' final Premier League away game of the 2016/17 season. (MU)

Moreover, after manual scrutiny of the data, false positives and mistagged instances were removed from the dataset. Non-finite past participle forms tagged as past tense, e.g. *saved* in example (7), constitute the largest portion of removed hits. A few examples where it was not possible to establish precisely what was meant due to incomplete sentences or typos were also removed, e.g. (8).⁴⁸

- (7) Hazard, this time from a position on the left, drifted inside and had a good effort *saved*. (CFC)
- (8) The Portuguese *played* a starring in the Wolves' dramatic winner too. (WWFC)

Following this procedure, two verbs (*netted* and *created*) retain their original count, while one instance of *fed* and around twenty-five of *saved* were removed. *Played* proved to be the verb with most mistagged instances, mainly non-finite forms receiving a vvd-tag, reducing the number of occurrences to be analysed considerably (from 1,131 to 743). As far as *took* is concerned, a decision was made to reduce the number of instances from the outset to get a more manageable sample. A random sample of 1,146 occurrences was considered (roughly every other concordance line). After removing multi-word uses and false positives, the total number of occurrences of *took* left for further analysis was 1,073, as shown in Table 2.

3.3. Some Dictionary Observations of the Selected Verbs

It is interesting to note that, with the exception of *take*, all the verbs studied here have their own entry in the *Kicktionary*, a specialised, multilingual “dictionary of football (soccer) language” that offers “information about 2,000 football terms in English, German and French, structured into a hierarchy of scenes and frames”.⁴⁹ Although this FrameNet approach offers interesting insights in terms of football situations in

⁴⁸ Although, in this case, one could infer that there is a word missing (*role* → *The Portuguese played a starring role* ...), suggesting that example (8) could have been counted among the transitive uses of *played*.

⁴⁹ <http://www.kicktionary.de/index.html>

which the verbs are used, the focus on transitivity in the present study means that traditional (corpus-based) dictionaries are more relevant.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) all the six verbs under study have both transitive and intransitive uses. The general verbs *create*, *take* and *feed* seem to be mainly transitive; transitive *feed* is even mentioned specifically in relation to football, where it has the meaning of “giving a pass to” (*OED*) or “pass the ball to someone” (*Lexico.com*). *Save* is referred to as either transitive or intransitive in sport contexts with the meaning of “to stop (a shot, etc.) from going into the goal”. Similarly, transitive and intransitive uses of *net* in football contexts are both defined with the same meaning: to score (a goal), e.g. “... Williams netting the only goal” and “... Don Revie netted from the 12-yard mark”, respectively. *Play* is described as a highly versatile verb with both transitive and intransitive uses both inside and outside of sports. This is also attested in Levin where *play* is part of several categories of object alternations, notably including “the unspecified object alternation”.⁵⁰ The example given of this alternation by Levin is *eat*, as in “Mike ate the cake”; “Mike ate (→ Mike ate a meal or something one typically eats)”.⁵¹ Football-related examples in the *OED* include “Derby play Watford today” and “He played for Scotland”.

On the basis of these observations, it may be more precise to speak of transitive and intransitive uses of the three football verbs rather than transitive verbs with or without object omission,⁵² as both seem to be well-established uses and are recognised in the dictionaries as such. It is thus expected that *netted*, *saved* and *played* will be used both transitively and intransitively in the material at hand, while *create*, *take* and *feed* will most likely not permit object omission. The second aim of this study is a result of this seemingly dual nature of the football verbs, namely to investigate what it is that determines the choice between transitive and intransitive uses in each case.

4. Analysis: Transitive and Intransitive Uses of the Verbs

To address the first research question, the analysis starts with an overview of the number of times the six selected verbs are used transitively and intransitively in the corpus. Table 3 reveals a clear tendency regarding object omissibility: overall, the verbs studied here most commonly retain their objects (in around 85% of the cases). However, the “football verbs” (*netted*, *saved* and *played*) are much more likely to be used intransitively than the intuitively more general verbs, even in a football context.

Nevertheless, some differences between the “football verbs” can be noted: *netted* and *played* more frequently occur with a direct object than without one—and significantly so in the case of *played*,⁵³ but not in the case of *netted*.⁵⁴ *Saved*, on the other hand, is more frequently used without an object, though not significantly so.⁵⁵

⁵⁰Levin.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 33.

⁵²Even though it may be argued that it is primarily semantic constraints that govern object omission, analogous to VP ellipsis (see Hardt), or indeed contextual and situational conditions licensing such omission (cf. Section 2.1).

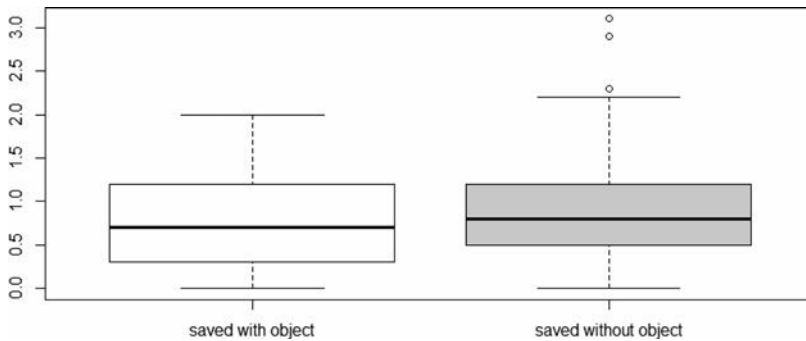
⁵³ $p < 0.01$ according to a Wilcoxon rank sum test (`wilcox.test` in R; R version 3.6.2). This test was used to compare the number of times the verbs occurred with and without an object within each of the twenty-nine files in order to uncover a significantly higher or lower use of object omission. As the data were not normally distributed when *played* occurred without an object, Wilcoxon was considered a suitable test.

⁵⁴ $p = 0.466$ (Wilcoxon rank sum test).

⁵⁵ $p = 0.1721$ (Wilcoxon rank sum test).

Table 3. Number of occurrences of verbs retaining or omitting their objects (raw numbers and percentages of total).

Verb form	With direct object Raw (%)	Without direct object Raw (%)	Total
<i>Netted</i>	136 (57.9%)	99 (42.1%)	235
<i>Fed</i>	232 (97.5%)	6 (2.5%)	238
<i>Saved</i>	163 (39.8%)	247 (60.2%)	410
<i>Created</i>	354 (100%)	0	354
<i>Played</i>	629 (84.7%)	114 (15.3%)	743
<i>Took</i>	1,073 (99.9%)	1	1,074
Total	2,587 (84.7%)	467 (15.3%)	3,054

**Figure 1.** Distribution of *saved* with and without object per 10,000 words.

Moreover, a closer look at the dispersion across the corpus files suggests that, despite the fact that writers commonly omit the object with *netted*, *saved* and *played* (see Table 3), there is some variation as to the number of times they actually opt for omission. As can be seen in Figure 1, the use of *saved* without an object ranges from 0 to 3.1 occurrences per 10,000 words (pttw) per file (including three outliers), whereas *saved* with an object ranges from 0 to 1.9 pttw.

Figure 1 further shows that writers who prefer object omission generally do so with a greater frequency than those who prefer keeping the object, as the median in the grey-shaded box (*saved* without object) is marginally higher than in the white box (*saved* with object). The whiskers in the plots also show that the upper quartile has a higher value in the grey box than in the white one. However, as pointed out above, this does not contribute to a statistically significant difference between *saved* with and without an object in the material (see footnote 53).

Regarding the other football verbs, *played* shows great variation between the clubs as to how often an object is used (between 0 and 6.3 pttw), while less variation is registered when it is used without an object (between 0 and 1 pttw, in addition to two outliers at 2 and 2.4 pttw). Similarly, for *netted*, there is less variation between the clubs' use of omission (between 0 and 1.8 pttw, and an outlier at 2.4) than their use of an object (between 0 and 2 pttw, and an outlier at 3.2). In other words, there seems to be slightly more agreement among the writers in the use of object omission with *played* and *netted* than with *saved*. Potential reasons for this will be further explored below (Sections 5.1–5.3).

A final observation from Table 3 worth making is that frequency of occurrence in itself does not seem to have an impact on a verb's transitivity potential, as the verb that most

frequently occurs in an intransitive environment is one of the verbs that is frequency-wise in the middle: *saved*. Rather, as expected, the verb's "footballness" seems to be a trigger for intransitive uses. However, the hitherto unsystematic qualitative scrutiny of the data suggests that the picture is most likely more complex and there seem to be individual differences between the verbs in this regard. It is therefore desirable to take a closer look at the verbs separately to investigate their conditions of use in terms of understood or expressed object, starting with one section each for the football verbs. In order to get the full and unbiased picture, all uses and meanings of the verbs will be considered, including those that may not be deemed typical of football language.

5. Analysis and Discussion of the Individual Verbs

This section primarily focuses on the second research question of why the transitive use might be chosen over the intransitive one and vice versa. It is believed that a detailed analysis of the immediate context of the verbs and their actual objects may go some way towards answering this question.

5.1. Netted

Netted is arguably the least complex of the verbs studied here with regard to the transitive-intransitive divide, as there seems to be only one thing that can be netted, both intuitively and according to the dictionaries: a goal. Indeed, this may very well be the understood and inherent meaning of intransitive *netted*, as in (9).

(9) ... Joshua King *netted* from close range ... (CPFC)

However, when looking at the transitive instances of *netted*, *goal* is far from the only possible (head noun of the) object. There are in fact eighteen different types of items functioning as the direct object of transitive *netted*. Of these, *goal(s)* is by far the most frequent one with fifty-six occurrences, i.e. around 41% of transitive *netted*. This frequent use may have contributed to the relative ease with which *netted* on its own has established an intransitive use with the meaning of scoring a goal. The second most frequent direct object type, with thirty-nine occurrences, is a (nominalised) ordinal number, as shown in (10), and arguably also shorthand for (*third*) *goal*.

(10) ... Bakary Sako *netted a delicious third* deep into stoppage-time ... (CPFC)

A similar use is noted in three cases with the noun *consolation*, which seems to have taken on the meaning of (*consolation*) *goal*, e.g. (11).⁵⁶

(11) Doucoure *netted a late consolation* for Watford ... (SFC)

⁵⁶One of these is ditransitive, the only one with *netted*: ... Gosling netted the Cherries a consolation *when he bundled the ball home from close range* ... (AFCB).

Of the remaining fifteen types, around half are nouns that can be said to carry the meaning of “goal”, e.g. *equaliser* (= a goal levelling the score), *brace* and *hat-trick* (= two and three goals scored by the same person in one game, respectively). The other half are nouns that typically describe the kick that resulted in a goal, e.g. *penalty* in example (12) = “netted a goal from a penalty kick”. Other nouns used in the same way include *volley*, *strike* and *effort*.⁵⁷

(12) Wilson *netted a penalty* in the first-half ... (FFC)

In conclusion, transitive *netted* does operate with objects other than the prototypical *goal*, which may be one reason for choosing the transitive variant over the intransitive one. In the same vein, it is interesting to note that not one single example of transitive *netted* with *goal* as the head noun of the direct object is left unmodified, of which (13) is a typical example.⁵⁸

(13) ... Aguero *netted the decisive goal* in what was almost a carbon copy of McBurnie’s missed chance. (MC)

It is therefore tempting to speculate that while the transitive use seems to “require” modification of the head noun, the intransitive use is only chosen when there is nothing special about the “netted goal”. In example (13), for instance, it was deemed necessary to report that the goal was decisive; otherwise the intransitive version could have been chosen instead: *Aguero netted in what was almost a carbon copy ...*

Finally, as noted in Section 4, *netted* shows a slightly more variable use of object inclusion than object omission among the clubs (between 0 and 2 pttw and 0 and 1.8 pttw, respectively). The discrepancy is not statistically significant and is most likely due to chance. This points to a coincidental preference for elaborating on what was special about the netted goals in the transitive case, e.g. (13), and for not doing so in the intransitive one, e.g. (9).

5.2. Saved

Saved is mainly used as an intransitive verb in the material (see Table 3). Intransitive *saved* is often followed by a manner adverbial, typically in the form of an (-ly) adverb (n = 128, i.e. in more than 50% of the cases), as in example (14), and less so in the form of a PP (n = 18), as in (15).⁵⁹

(14) Aaron Ramsdale *saved bravely* at the feet of Gayle ... (AFCB)

(15) ... De Gea *saved with his feet* ... (CFC)

⁵⁷See Meier for similar observations in both English and German.

⁵⁸This is arguably reminiscent of light-verb constructions where the use of a light verb + N facilitates modification that is not possible with the simple verb (e.g., *go for a (long) walk* vs. **walk longly*). This observation also applies to example (31), where *?Both sides played attractively* would be awkward at best. Thanks to one of the reviewers for pointing this out.

⁵⁹Similar tendencies are noted for a variety of verbs in football commentaries and match reports by Meier, 18, 22, in which German and English verbs are often followed by an adverb or a PP.

Other frequent sequences with intransitive *saved* include *saved* (adverbial) *from* + name of player (n = 62), as in (16), and no complementation at all—in twenty-four cases—as in (17).

(16) Karius *saved* [low down] from Eriksen anyway ... (TH)

(17) Tom Heaton *saved*. (CFC)

The unexpressed object can in most cases be lexicalised as a shot. It is, however, the case that the reference is just as often situational as it is contextual, as the actual shot, volley, free-kick, etc. is often left unexpressed in the text. This results in examples such as (18) and (19) being equally likely to occur, the former with no explicit reference to the (kind of) shot that was saved, and the latter with explicit reference to a shot in the form of a volley.

(18) Vardy got in behind twice in the first half, had what looked like a decent shout for a penalty waved away while Ben Foster *saved* well from Harvey Barnes ... (WFC)

(19) Krychowiak was denied from distance and Matt Phillips could not convert the rebound, before Foster *saved* well from Walcott's volley at the other end. (WBA)

Similarly, the transitive uses mainly describe an action in which the ball is directed towards goal—as a shot—and then saved; nouns describing this include *shot*, *strike*, *header*, and this is exemplified in (20) with the most frequent noun, namely *shot* (n = 32).

(20) Cabellero *saved* a shot from Tielemans ... (CFC)

Interestingly, several of the direct objects are relative pronouns referring to shots, efforts, headers, etc. An example is given in (21). This syntactic choice rules out the intransitive use, but allows the addition of the manner in which the shot was saved, i.e. *well* in example (21). Manner adverbials are typically not used when the direct object follows *saved*.

(21) ... Jan Vertonghen tried his luck from distance with a *shot* which Fabianski *saved* *well* ... (SCAFC)

Other typical head nouns represent set pieces, such as penalties, corners and free-kicks. In effect, these are also shots, but they differ from the prototypical shot in that their primary meanings arguably describe a situation rather than the actual kick on the ball. However, in context, it becomes clear that, when saved, a penalty does in fact refer to a “penalty shot”, e.g. (22), as the intended meaning here is not that he saved the penalty situation. It is however important to mention that it was a penalty (shot) that was saved, something which the intransitive variant would not have revealed.

(22) Petr Cech *saved* a penalty as he celebrated his 200th Premier League clean sheet in a convincing win at Emirates Stadium. (AFC)

Around twenty occurrences of transitive *saved* do not involve shots on goal, and for this reason do not seem to be eligible for intransitive use. The largest portion of these instances have direct objects that involve human beings, including teams, as in example (23), and players, as in (24).

- (23) ... the woodwork *saved* City from going behind. (CPFC)
 (24) The fact that there were a couple of covering defenders probably *saved* the midfielder from a red card ... (AFC)

Moreover, while the “saviour” in most of the cases where a shot is the (implied) head noun is the goalkeeper (examples 14–22 above), this need not be so, particularly when the direct object refers to a team or a human being rather than the ball, as testified in (23) and (24), respectively. It is also obvious that *saved* takes on a different meaning in these cases; it is no longer a question of preventing a goal being scored, but rather of protecting “(a person) from a likely misfortune” (*OED*) or of preventing “the loss of (a game or match)” (*OED*).

In the ENMaRC material, *saved* can be said to represent a number of distinct meanings, depending on lexico-grammatical features. In addition to the ones mentioned, there are two marginal uses and meanings in the match reports, both of which are relatively fixed phrases: *save the day* and *save the best (until last)*. The former is related to the “prevent-loss” meaning, whereas the latter has the meaning of “[t]o keep and store up instead of spending or using” (*OED*).

Finally, there is more variation in the clubs’ use of *saved* without an object (0 to 3.1 occurrences pttw) than of *saved* with an object (0 to 1.9 pttw); see Figure 1. The difference is not statistically significant and it is hard to determine why this should be so other than individual preferences on the part of the journalists. It seems clear, though, that those who use intransitive *saved* more often than others do so to be able to specify the manner in which a shot was saved: *saved comfortably*, *saved well*, etc. A case in point is the Bournemouth match reports, where a manner adverb is used in this way in twenty-one out of the thirty-four intransitive cases.

5.3. Played

Played is the most complex of the so-called football verbs discussed here. In many ways it can be viewed as a hypernym covering many aspects of the game, as alluded to in Section 3.2, and is in that sense a more general term than the verbs discussed in Sections 5.1 and 5.2. It is also more syntactically versatile than *netted* and *saved* with recorded occurrences of traditional (mono- and complex) transitive and intransitive uses (examples (25) and (26), respectively), as well as more delexical (transitive) uses, as in *played a pass* (= *passed*) in (27), and phrasal verb uses, as already shown in example (6) above with *played out*.

- (25) Lanzini *played* the perfect through ball ... (WHU)
 (26) Tom Davies *played* with bite and energy ... (EFC)
 (27) Bernardo *played* a pass to the overlapping Gundogan ... (MC)

These examples clearly demonstrate that not only is *play(ed)* syntactically flexible but also semantically and collocationally so. In the current context, it is therefore important to investigate the immediate lexico-grammatical environment of *played* in order to shed light on factors which may encourage an intransitive use of this verb.

According to the *OED* and *Lexico.com*, *play* has an intransitive use that refers to taking part in a game or sport, as in the example quoted in Section 3.3, “He played for Scotland” (*OED*), and could also refer to playing “in a specified position” (*Lexico.com*), e.g. “he played in goal”. These sports-related intransitive uses arguably imply that *play* means “play football (in general)” or “play a game (of football)”, and as such are derived from a transitive use. In the ENMaRC material, these account for the lion’s share of the occurrences without an object (88 out of 113, i.e. 78%), and are indeed established intransitive uses. Examples include (28) and (29).

(28) Huddersfield *played* [football] without fear, despite ... (MU)

(29) Mauricio Pochettino made six changes to the team that *played* [the game] against Newcastle in midweek. (TH)

Before accounting for the remaining twenty-five intransitive occurrences, we need to look at the most frequently occurring direct object of transitive *played*, namely *ball*. It functions as the object head noun in 181 occurrences. Additionally, the pronoun *it*, referring to the ball, is used thirty-five times, making the ball the direct object *par excellence*, featuring in 34% of all transitive occurrences of simplex *played*. The question is whether the ball’s position as the prototypical object of *played* makes it easy to drop, as it may be inferred due to entrenchment, i.e. *ball* is entrenched in the writers’/readers’ minds through frequent exposure.⁶⁰ The analysis of intransitive *played* does in fact reveal that the most likely understood object in the remaining twenty-five intransitive instances (i.e. 22%) is the ball, as in (30). Neither of the understood objects referred to above would fit in this context: **football*, **game*.

(30) ... Jefferson Lerma drove forwards, *played* [the ball] square to Brooks who in turn found substitute Junior Stanislas ... (AFCB)

The nouns *football* and *game/match* are used as expressed objects much less frequently than *ball*, with twenty-five occurrences altogether. Interestingly, when they are used they seem to carry a meaning different from the intransitive uses where these nouns are implied; compare examples (28) and (31). Omitting the object in (31) would not result in the meaning of *played* [football] in the intransitive example in (28).

(31) Both sides *played* some attractive *football* in the early stages ... (HC)

Returning to transitive *played* again, it is interesting to note that the ball may not be the only option for the understood object in (30). Other common object head nouns in the material—*pass* and *cross* with 110 occurrences combined—would also fit the context in (30). Thus, it may be fair to say that the meaning of the intransitive

⁶⁰Cf. “canonical aspects of the game”. Ruppenhofer and Michaelis, “A Constructional Account,” 169.

examples is vague between (at least) these three options. The criterion for object omission rather seems to be that the intended object has to involve the ball in a patient role: play the ball, pass the ball, cross the ball. However, the nouns *pass* and *cross* differ from *ball* in that they, in combination with *played*, represent delexical uses of the verb. In other words, an example such as (32) is arguably a lexical variant and competitor of (33).

(32) ... the Brazilian *played a pass* back into the feet of Snodgrass. (FFC)

(33) ... the Brazilian *passed* back into the feet of Snodgrass.

More specialised ways of passing the ball, some of which are relatively frequent in the material, e.g. *one-two* as in example (34),⁶¹ would not easily give rise to intransitive uses.

(34) ... De Bruyne *played a one-two* with Jesus before producing a beautiful left-footed strike ... (MC)

Other object head nouns that do not seem omissible represent uses that do not involve the ball: *part*, *role*, *advantage*, *card*.

The analysis of *played* shows that most of the intransitive instances are in line with the *OED*'s entry for *play*. The only intransitive use not explicitly covered by a definition in the *OED* refers to situations where the ball is passed in a rather unremarkable way—a standard way of delivering the ball to someone, as in example (30). In order to report on more special ways of playing the ball, journalists in the ENMaRC tend to opt for transitive uses. Even in the many cases where the ball is the object head noun, it is often modified as in (35).

(35) ... the Senegalese nodded into the side-netting before the Austrian ace again raced forward and *played a delightful ball* across the danger zone ... (SC)

Finally, it is also interesting to note that the direct object can be either animate (typically a player) or inanimate (typically the ball). In combination with an animate object, *played* is exclusively used as a complex transitive verb in the ENMaRC material, e.g. (36), and not monoton transitively with the meaning of selecting a player to take part in a game, although this is a use recorded in the *OED*: "He played Devon Malcolm, who has at last found a rhythm ...". These are instances that Bergh and Ohlander refer to as "unconventional objects".⁶²

(36) Then, finally, the break City had waited for when Silva *played Leroy Sane into the box* ... (MC)

⁶¹*One-two* occurs seventy-one times in the material and can be defined as: "A move in which a player plays a short pass to a teammate and moves forward to receive an immediate return pass" (*Lexico.com*). Other more remarkable "things" to play but less frequently attested than *one-two* include *nutmeg*, *give-and-go*, *corner*, *free-kick* (see discussion of the latter two in connection with *saved*).

⁶²Bergh and Ohlander, "*Iniesta Passed*."

The flexibility of *play* as a verb with regard to transitivity, meaning and collocability may go some way towards explaining the apparent reluctance to open for more intransitive uses than those that are already established.

With regard to the dispersion of transitive vs. intransitive *played*, the greater variation between the clubs' use with an object than without could be due to there being more consensus among the writers regarding the intransitive use. There is more room for variation with transitive *played* as there are delexical uses and phrasal verb uses that may not be favoured by everyone.

5.4. The Three General Verbs: Feed, Create, Take

The three general verb forms that were selected for this study—*fed*, *created* and *took*—were shown to be fairly true to their transitive nature. While *created* is never used as an intransitive verb in the ENMaRC, intransitive *took* was recorded once, example (37), and intransitive *fed* was recorded twice (with an oblique object), e.g. (38). All three instances were produced by the in-house journalist at Bournemouth.

- (37) Lukaku, another replacement, *took*, but his effort cannoned back off the defensive wall. (AFCB)
- (38) Another slick break and Brooks *fed* wide to Callum Wilson who fired across ... (AFCB)

In the case of intransitive *took*, its very infrequent use in the ENMaRC may be due to the form of the verb and the mode of the reports, as I believe spoken commentary or minute-by-minute reporting regularly produces utterances such as the one in (39) to say that Bruno Fernandes will take the penalty.

- (39) Bruno Fernandes to *take*.⁶³

Although none of these verbs seem to be particularly interesting in terms of object omission in the present data, *fed* is arguably interesting in match reports with regard to the *kind* of object it allows. The use of *fed* in the data is in accordance with the dictionary in that it is typically monotransitive. However, the direct object is most commonly animate, i.e. a player (in 168 out of 238 occurrences), e.g. (40), a use which, according to the dictionary, seems to be reserved for giving food to someone, typically pets, babies or the hungry of the world.

- (40) He *fed* the overlapping *Bellerin* ... (AFC)

Lexico.com singles out one use of *feed* in ball games, in which it takes an inanimate direct object and has the meaning of passing the ball to a player, e.g. "Erwin Koeman fed a long ball into Van Basten from the left". This is consistent with the second most frequent use of *fed* in the ENMaRC material. In the case of *fed*, then, rather than dropping

⁶³<https://www.football.london/tottenham-hotspur-fc/news/tottenham-vs-man-united-live-18427648> [accessed 31 August 2020].

the direct object altogether, it is rather found with a different kind of object than the dictionary suggests; cf. Bergh and Ohlander's "unconventional objects".⁶⁴ It could perhaps be claimed that the use observed in the match reports is semantically ditransitive with a direct object patient ("the ball") and an indirect object beneficiary ("the player"), and the direct object has in most cases been left out. From the football context it is understood that it is the ball that is "fed" (in)to a player, thus rendering it redundant.

With *took*, on the other hand, little out of the ordinary seems to happen. One reason for this could be that this verb is simply too polysemous and general to be readily eligible for object omission, even in a football context. Apart from the one intransitive in example (37), *took* occurs in syntactic and semantic environments as expected: monotransitive, complex transitive, delexical structures, multi-word verb uses, in addition to some set phrases, e.g. *took heart*. These uses do represent a range of meanings, though, spanning from "standard" ones such as "acquire", "receive", as in example (41), "kick" (42), "need" (43) and "score" (44). Of these, it is only the meaning of "score" which is not recorded in the dictionaries consulted here.

- (41) Holebas *took* a yellow for a foul on Richarlison and picked a fight with the Brazilian. (WFC)
- (42) Downing *took* the free-kick ... (MFC)
- (43) And again it *took* some brilliance from Butland to keep the Clarets out. (BFC)
- (44) Calvert-Lewin *took* his goal excellently ... (EFC)

Finally, to complete the picture, *created* represents the lexico-grammatically most homogeneous use of the verbs studied here. Although forty-one different nouns are used as head nouns of the direct object, three of them stand out—*chance*, *opening*, *opportunity*—and together account for more than 75% of the occurrences. These are synonymous in the contexts in which they are used here, all referring to a situation in which the attacking team came close to scoring a goal, e.g. (45) and (46).

- (45) ... Bournemouth *created* good chances but ... (AFCB)
- (46) ... Burnley *created* clear openings throughout ... (WHU)

Such a high proportion of synonymous combinations would seem to leave little room for creativity in the use of *created* in football match reports. This observation begs the question why this verb does not seem eligible for object deletion, as in the case of e.g. *netted* [*a goal*] or *fed* [*the ball*]; why not *created* [*a chance*]? It is in fact surprising to observe that, in the few cases where the reference of the direct object with *created* is not clearly stated, *goal* is the understood head noun rather than *chance*, *opening* or *opportunity*, as illustrated in (47) and (48); this can be inferred from the immediate context that clearly refers to a goal being scored, e.g. *slotted home his first goal* in (47). In other words, the understood object of *created* in a semi-intransitive use seems to be reserved for "goal".

⁶⁴Bergh and Ohlander, "Iniesta Passed."

- (47) Atsu *created it* with a superb lofted pass which caught the Spurs backline out, and Joelinton took the ball down and slotted home his first goal for the club with aplomb. (NU)
- (48) Marcos Alonso *created the first* with a driving run and pass ... (CFC)

The three general verbs proved to be fairly stable as transitive verbs. Nevertheless, the more detailed study contributed some new insights in the sense that some special uses of these verbs in a football context were uncovered.

6. Conclusion

This study sought to answer two questions in particular: (1) how often are transitive verbs used intransitively in football match reports?; and (2) what seems to determine the choice between the transitive and intransitive use where both are possible?

As far as the former question is concerned, the analysis revealed that the so-called football verbs are more flexible in this regard, and are more readily used intransitively than their more general counterparts. Although individual differences between the verbs were noted, they all show an inclination to be part of the “unspecified object alternation”, in Levin’s terms.⁶⁵ While *saved* was most commonly, albeit not significantly, used intransitively, both *netted* and *played* have a preference for transitive uses in the material, and *played* even significantly so. One common denominator, though, seems to be that unremarkable and canonical situations facilitate object omission, although the actual object may be vague between several semi-synonymous nouns in the case of *netted* and *saved* and also between several different canonical situations in the case of *played*. Nevertheless, the intransitive bias of transitive verbs in a football context is perhaps not as prominent as we may have been led to believe from previous studies.⁶⁶

The second question produced a more complex set of answers that may be said to reflect both contextual and situational clues,⁶⁷ and lexical idiosyncrasies regarding circumstances that may license object omission.⁶⁸ Contextually and situationally, the football match report genre plays an important role for a verb to drop its object. With the verbs that are not directly linked to football *per se*, the football context was shown to give rise to some special uses, some of which were related to transitivity, as in the case of *fed* with a human (player) object. Similarly, the verbs show idiosyncratic differences contributing to their (individual) behaviour regarding transitivity and other related issues in this particular genre. It should be stressed, however, that the findings presented here may not be representative of football language in general, as other sub-genres of this special language may have other preferences, as suggested in the case of intransitive *take* with the meaning of taking a penalty. To establish this with any certainty, a follow-up study including several modes and types of football language is a possible avenue for future research.

Similarly, a systematic comparative study of these (and other) verbs in general vs. football language is called for to shed further light on how sharply delimited football language

⁶⁵Levin, 33.

⁶⁶E.g. Ruppenhofer and Michaelis, “A Constructional Account”; Bergh and Ohlander, “*Iniesta Passed*.”

⁶⁷Quirk *et al.*; Brisson; Ruppenhofer and Michaelis, “A Constructional Account”; Bergh and Ohlander, “*Iniesta Passed*.”

⁶⁸Huddleston and Pullum; Bergh and Ohlander, “*Iniesta Passed*.”

is from general language, thus addressing a question posed by Bergh and Ohlander.⁶⁹ Also, as this study has only focused on a limited set of past tense verb forms, the whole lemmas as well as a larger set of verbs need to be considered both in the match reports and in general language to complete the picture.

Yet another interesting angle on transitivity in football language would be to investigate to what extent the level of object omission reported here extends to other languages. At a glance, in the Norwegian part of the ENMaRC, verbs closely related to those studied here seem to behave similarly in Norwegian, but a more thorough investigation is needed to determine this with more certainty. In other words, a traditional contrastive analysis of linguistic phenomena in different languages would be welcome to establish how stable seemingly genre-specific tendencies are across languages.

With these suggestions for further research, Bergh and Ohlander's observation that more remains to be done in the linguistic study of football language still stands.⁷⁰ However, this study has gone some way towards mending this. Specifically, it has been shown that, although object omission has been claimed to be a typical feature of football language, there are lexico-grammatical restrictions even on football verbs in this regard. The study further demonstrates that a systematic corpus-based study of transitive verbs may contribute not only to an overview of how pervasive the phenomenon of object omission is, but also to a better understanding of the (lexico-grammatical) circumstances that are at play when an object is dropped.

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⁶⁹Bergh and Ohlander, "Free Kicks," 15.

⁷⁰Ibid., 41.

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Appendix

Table A. Overview of the Premier League clubs and data in the ENMaRC.

Club abbreviation	Club	Word tokens (AntConc counts ^a)
AFC	Arsenal	74,600
AVFC	Aston Villa	8,348
AFCB	Bournemouth	117,428
BHA	Brighton & Hove Albion	70,157
BFC	Burnley	122,046
CCFC	Cardiff City	19,490
CFC	Chelsea	135,365
CPFC	Crystal Palace	104,897
EFC	Everton	191,100
FFC	Fulham	29,680
HT	Huddersfield Town	82,061
HC	Hull City	24,802
LC	Leicester City	23,968
LFC	Liverpool	40,981
MC	Manchester City	97,764
MU	Manchester United	102,170
MFC	Middlesbrough	25,398
NU	Newcastle United	65,005
NCFC	Norwich City	24,631
SUFC	Sheffield United	25,623
SFC	Southampton	123,657
SC	Stoke City	40,555
SAFC	Sunderland	27,473
SCAFC	Swansea City	42,339
TH	Tottenham Hotspur	120,543
WFC	Watford	87,739
WBA	West Bromwich Albion	26,442
WHU	West Ham United	77,188
WWFC	Wolverhampton Wanderers	52,086
		TOTAL: 1,983,536

^aThe AntConc token counts are based on the raw files with the tag settings “hide tags” and the token definition settings “number” and “append” [apostrophe].

Table B. List of top 100 verbs tagged as past tense in the ENMaRC (verbs in bold have been used transitively in the ENMaRC).

Rank	Occ. (raw)	Verb vvs	Rank	Occ. (raw)	Verb vvs	Rank	Occ. (raw)	Verb vvs
1	3685	made	35	492	put	69	294	happened
2	3594	came	36	465	needed	70	293	lost
3	2,662	went	37	456	beat	71	290	rose
4	2,509	saw	38	446	curled	72	287	finished
5	2,456	took	39	441	ended	73	283	met
6	2,019	looked	40	437	shot ^a	74	281	delivered
7	1,911	found	41	435	saved	75	281	pushed
8	1,665	got	42	430	flew	76	272	meant
9	1,363	continued	43	426	pulled	77	272	received
10	1,183	started	44	421	remained	78	272	responded
11	1,131	played	45	411	drew	79	267	drove
12	1,099	fired	46	407	deflected	80	267	enjoyed
13	1,036	fell	47	406	denied	81	267	thought
14	847	sent	48	403	opened	82	266	blocked
15	840	picked	49	399	seemed	83	263	cleared
16	821	struck	50	389	held	84	259	became
17	808	began	51	384	managed	85	259	flashed
18	808	headed	52	383	set	86	259	nodded
19	799	gave	53	362	missed	87	254	led

(Continued)

Table B. Continued.

Rank	Occ. (raw)	Verb vvs	Rank	Occ. (raw)	Verb vvs	Rank	Occ. (raw)	Verb vvs
20	766	hit	54	359	allowed	88	253	slipped
21	699	kept	55	357	returned	89	252	worked
22	690	broke	56	356	stepped	90	239	fed
23	670	scored	57	354	created	91	235	netted
24	669	turned	58	353	doubled	92	234	entered
25	610	produced	59	352	added	93	232	bounced
26	610	showed	60	348	appeared	94	232	threatened
27	594	forced	61	335	arrived	95	230	claimed
28	587	proved	62	330	dropped	96	230	tested
29	550	replaced	63	323	stood	97	220	combined
30	511	failed	64	321	followed	98	220	felt
31	504	tried	65	320	raced	99	217	suffered
32	502	won	66	312	deserved	100	216	rolled
33	501	left	67	307	ran			
34	500	brought	68	302	united ^b			

a Most of these are false positives where the noun *shot* has been tagged as a past tense verb.

b This is a false positive; *united* is not used as a verb at all, but is the short form of a proper noun, e.g. *Manchester United*, *Sheffield United*.