

Rumaiz Ahmed

Professor Cam Haigh

English 110

18 November, 2025

People Don't Need a Language: The unknown language

Christmas Eve 1914, In the middle of World War One. Known as one of the deadliest wars in history. A British soldier on the western side lay there in the mud with no hope of escaping or leaving the trench except in an ambulance. But hours later, something happened, something that no soldier would have ever thought of while holding a gun. Both sides, the Germans and the British, came out of their trenches onto the no man's land. No translators to aid the language gap. No peace treaties. But they played Football. Amidst all the chaos the ball itself became the peace treaty and the translator. This goes to prove that this sport operates as a means of communication or as scholars describe it as “a universal language that resonates with the complexities of society” (Coombs, 46). However, while football has functioned as peoples language transcending borders and language barriers, In more recent its transformation from grassroots into a commercial industry threatens to change the very soul of made it the universal language and peoples sport.

To understand the idea of people's game we must first dive into the origins of this sport and why it is considered as is. In their peer-reviewed study "The Origins of Football: History, Ideology and the Making of 'The People's Game,'" published in *Sport in History*, researchers Taylor and Matthew examine how football's identity became mixed in inter class issues at its

beginning. The authors bring the argument that football is widely remembered as “peoples game” yet this label itself came due to the high elites trying to look down on the sport and by differentiating the football association from rugby’s elite associations. This working class vs high society split is the very foundation of Football being universal and the simplicity of this sport, where it only requires a ball and an open space, making it accessible regardless of economic status or formal education.

The Christmas Truce of 1914 exemplifies this accessibility in action. According to the

History Channel's documentation of soldier accounts, A British soldier Ernie Williams in an

interview he recollected “some makeshift soccer

play on what turned out to be an icy pitch: ‘The

ball appeared from somewhere, I don't know

where... They made up some goals and one

fellow went in goal and then it was just a general

kick-about. I should think there were about a

couple of hundred taking part.’” (Baime) and



from the Germans side a general “described a pick-up soccer game in his diary,” (Baime) This all

goes to show that verbal communication of these two sides proved to be unnecessary and

pointless once a football appeared and that regardless of the conditions due to the simplicity of

the sport it was even playable in even the harshest conditions. This moment supports Taylor and

Matthew's thesis that football's working-class origins created a game so fundamental that it could

transcend not just class barriers but national ones, even amid one of history's deadliest conflicts.

Football operates as more than a simple set of rules, it functions as what philosopher

Ludwig Wittgenstein termed a "language-game," where "the speaking of language is part of an

activity, or a form of life" (Rossing and Skrubbeltrang, 2). In their 2016 peer-reviewed study "The Language of Football: A Cultural Analysis of Selected World Cup Nations" published in Culture and Organization, researchers Rossing and Skrubbeltrang systematically analyze how different nations "speak" football with distinct cultural accents. Upon researching the World Cup matches between 1930 to 2014, they argue that Italian football emphasizes the tactical discipline known as catenaccio, while Brazilian football celebrates and world wide known Jogo Bonito which is creative expression. Yet when met on the world stage the both are still able to understand and play football. This concept of national "dialects" Wittgenstein's philosophy where players worldwide understand the game's rules and ideas, while expressing cultural identity through their playing style.

Brazilian jogo bonito exemplifies this cultural expression. As documented in a 2023 analysis published on LinkedIn examining Brazilian football culture, jogo bonito (Portuguese for "beautiful game") "emphasizes beauty, style, and individual accomplishment" where players use "skills and creativity, not just to score, but to score beautifully" (Pires). This philosophy emerged from Brazil's street football culture, particularly at the altinha beach games in Copacabana, where players from favelas developed techniques to express joy and resistance against poverty. Nike's iconic "Joga Bonito" advertising campaign (2005-2006) featured Brazilian legends like Ronaldinho demonstrating these skills, spreading this playing style globally through multimedia storytelling that required no linguistic translation and viewers worldwide understood the artistry purely through visual demonstration and tried at every level to mimic them.

This conclusion between academic research and cultural practice reveals an important distinction. While Rossing and Skrubbeltrang demonstrate that football maintains cultural distinctiveness through national styles, the global spread of jogo bonito shows how football's

universal language allows cultural exchange and how kids in Tokyo, Lagos, and New York now practice Brazilian street football techniques they learned through YouTube videos, communicating across continents through shared physical literacy, no words said, no playbook written, just videos of showing skills and demonstration.

The true test of football as a universal language occurs not in professional stadiums but on street corners, empty lots, and makeshift pitches where no cameras broadcast and no sponsors profit. Recent events in New York City illustrate this grassroots authenticity. In late 2025, incoming mayor Zohran Mamdani organized an inter-borough football tournament that attracted participants from incredibly diverse backgrounds, where the world's city brought in immigrants from Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, alongside native New Yorkers, where they were all attracted to the sport and play and who required no extensive explanation or political motivation to participate. The game itself provided enough reason to gather people, showcasing what sports communication research identifies as football's capacity to "bridge the gap between theory and practice," creating immediate understanding between people who share no other common language or interest. (Coombs, 47)

This grassroots reality changes drastically with professional football's trajectory. A 2015 study on football commercialization documents the sport's "hypercommodification," with European club market values exploding from €7 billion in 2005 to over €30 billion by 2014 (Mariotti, 18). Countries now pour billions into football infrastructure not for community building but to project national dominance and attract global investment as can be seen with the



recent world cup announcement such Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco, Where billions are being poured into building stadiums, or even the 2026 world cup where each parking ticket costs about 200 dollars which used to be a fraction of the price in the 2022 world cup. This commercialization fundamentally alters football's language of simplicity, being able to be universal, and where street games communicate joy, community, and creative expression, professional football increasingly communicates wealth, branding, and corporate strategy undermining the biggest reason how football made it to where it is now, historically speaking.

Brazilian street football provides a model for resistance. Despite professional football's commercialization, *altinha* games continue on Brazilian beaches where players from diverse economic backgrounds gather to play without prizes, scouts, or spectators beyond local communities. These games preserve what Taylor and Matthew call football's identity as "the people's game" an accessible form of expression belonging to participants rather than corporations. The Mamdani tournament in New York represents a similar reclamation, using football's universal language to build community solidarity outside commercial structures.

Football's evolution from the Christmas Truce to what we know of today maps a transformation from spontaneous human connection to carefully managed corporate spectacle. Yet the language itself, the physical way of play by passing, dribbling, shooting, the emotional idea of joy when scoring, heartbreak when losing. It is something that remains accessible to anyone with a ball. This is why grassroots initiatives like Mamdani's tournament and Brazilian street football matter. They represent communities refusing to let corporations monopolize a language that belongs to everyone, an



idea that is also brought by StreetGols which lays on the basic idea of making Football more accessible throughout the world, through their tournaments, and pickups.

Taylor and Matthew's research emphasizes that football's identity as "the people's game" was always challenged, emerging from working-class communities pushing for cultural ownership. Today's challenge involves a similar assertion reclaiming football's universal language from commercial interests that profit by restricting access to professional leagues, expensive equipment, and exclusive academies. When kids in New York boroughs organize pickup games, when Brazilians play *altinha* on public beaches, when refugees in camps improvise goals from rubble, they speak football in its purest dialect, the one that emerged in those WWI trenches when enemies chose play over violence.

The question isn't whether football can remain a universal language, its fundamental accessibility that ensures it will. The question is whether we'll allow that language to become commercialized to the point where only the wealthy can speak fluently, or whether we'll preserve spaces where anyone can participate in the conversation. As Bairnsfather and his fellow soldiers demonstrated over a century ago, football's greatest power lies in its ability to create understanding when no other communication is possible. That power doesn't require a billion-dollar stadium or corporate sponsorship. It only requires a ball, an open space, and people willing to play.

Works Cited

- Baime, AJ. "WWI's Christmas Truce: When Fighting Paused for the Holiday | HISTORY." *History.com*, 29 October 2018, <https://www.history.com/articles/christmas-truce-1914-world-war-i-soldier-accounts>. Accessed 18 November 2025.
- Coombs, Hayden V. "The Power of Sport Communication: Bridging Divides and Inspiring Change." *Utah Journal of Communication*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13905031>. Accessed 18 November 2025.
- Mariotti, Francesco. "Logic of Appropriateness in Football Commercialization: The Case of UEFA Champions League." *International Institute of Social Studies*, 2014, <https://thesis.eur.nl/pub/17355/Francesco-Mariotti.pdf>. Accessed 18 November 2025.
- Pires, Francisco Quinteiro. "Jogo Bonito: The Art and Politics of Brazilian Football*." *LinkedIn*, 2025, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/jogo-bonito-art-politics-brazilian-football-quinteiro-pires-ph-d--m92he/>. Accessed 18 November 2025.
- Rossing, Niels Nygaard, and Lotte Stausgaard Skrubbeltrang. "The language of football: a cultural analysis on selected world cup nations." *Culture and Organization*, 2016, <https://vbn.aau.dk/en/publications/the-language-of-football-a-cultural-analysis-on-selected-world-cup-nations/>. Accessed 18 November 2025.

Multi-media

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DEyRyAlyzal/>. Accessed 18 November 2025

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/199225757@N02/54766604102/in/album-72177720328841127/>

Accessed 18 11 2025

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/ww1-soccer-photos> accessed 18 November 2025