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English 124

21 November 2012

Football: An Exclusive Duality

There are 11 players on a rectangular field, trying to reach the other end. Clearly, I'm describing the sport of football—but which one? Most people understand the word refers mainly to one of two sports, British or American, but many dictionaries only describe a single game. The American Heritage Dictionary defines football as:

> A game played by two teams of 11 players each on a rectangular, 100-yard-long field with goal lines and goalposts at either end, the object being to gain possession of a ball and advance it in running or passing plays across the opponent's goal line or kick it through the air between the opponent's goalposts. (American Heritage Dictionary).

In opposition, the Macmillan British Dictionary's definition states: "A game in which two teams of eleven players kick a round ball and try to score goals." (Macmillan). Both institutions share the goal of explaining words' meanings', yet they fail to depict another culture's definition. Coincidentally enough, the American-Heritage Dictionary—American in origin—only highlights the American sport. The Macmillan Dictionary—British in origin—provides only the British sport. Although some other dictionaries list both sports, this division highlights that the word *football* isn't a flexible choice. Instead, *football* requires a commitment, an exclusive duality in which using both interchangeably is not acceptable. After historical and personal analysis, I have discovered that this issue represents more than battle of words; it reflects a national rivalry.

The first known use of the word *football* in writing dates back to 1424 in a Scottish law; the sport became illegal due to its association with hooliganism

(Donaldson). However, this term referred to one of many sports played on foot (as opposed to on a horse). From this period until the late 19th century, football did not refer to a specific sport or game. Some variants paralleled rugby, in which players used their hands more than their feet. This changed on October 26th, 1863, when a group of teams in England formally created the rules of "association Football," the precursor to the British sport today ("Overview of Soccer"). Shortly after, players shortened the word *association* to *soccer*. Therefore, both words, *football* and *soccer*, originated before the first variant of American football, which arose in 1869. Some argue that American football truly differentiated itself from rugby in 1906, when colleges agreed to legalize the forward pass, which remains illegal in rugby ("College Football History."). At this point, two different sports existed in two different countries, but shared the same name.

Naturally, Americans use the word *soccer* when referring to British association football to avoid confusion. Over time, many British people resented this substitution word, as they felt the original term *football* had been wrongly rebranded. While watching British football with a British family friend, I once referred to the sport as *soccer*. My dad's friend sternly informed me, "It's called football. You're British, not American." He believed I had chosen the synonym because I believed the word *football* rightfully referred to American Football. In reality, I used the word soccer to avoid confusion, because the word *football* in America almost always refers to the American version. My dad's friend probably agrees with Youtube user Ps3Blaze, who commented on a video that had the word soccer in the title. The comments reads "*Football. It's football for fuck sake, you can't change the name of the most popular sport on planet earth, just because you have another sport with the same name in your country…." (Ps3Blaze).

Even though the word soccer is used throughout Canada, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa ("Overview of Soccer"), many British football fans blame the US specifically, because it has domestically rebranded the meaning of *football*. The British didn't always hate the word *soccer*, as it originated from Britain. However, they now hate settling for the word *soccer* because it can imply the American use of *football* is legitimate, as if people use *soccer* to avoid mixing up the two types of football. To the British this double meaning is fallacious; as my dad's friend would argue, there remains only type of football.

However, the conversation often escalates from determining which words are acceptable. When one sides becomes frustrated with the other, it often attacks the other side's sport in an ad-hominem manner. Each country's popular culture illustrates this escalated conflict. John Cleese, a famous British comedian, jokes in an online video that the American sport involves frequent breaks between plays so "the players don't have to think too long" (*John Cleese rants*). He continues this condescending tone as he criticizes an American inability to use the compound word of *football* to refer to a sport that primarily involves one's *foot* striking a *ball*. He patronizingly states, "It isn't difficult America, the clue is in the title" (*John Cleese rants*). These jabs aren't limited to British comedians though; Daniel Tosh, an American TV personality, criticized British football on his Comedy Central show, *Tosh.0*. He jokingly ranted that football isn't supposed to be played by "Five foot six inch fairies lightly jogging for 3 hours." He also joked, "Maybe there would be more scoring if they weren't flopping all the time" (*Awesome Soccer Rant*). By casting a negative light over the other culture's sport, each country feels

more comfortable that their football is the best football. Although these comedians lightheartedly jest, the clear underlying conflict between the two sports reveals itself.

Some may argue that these criticisms aren't linked to a previous linguistic divergence; instead, these two sports have just become natural rivals. However, after examining relationships between other sports, it becomes clear that the two sports have established an especially unique relationship. Very few cricket players attack hockey's worth as a sport, and debates between British football and baseball rarely occur. Gaelic football, for example, shares many similarities to American football. However, most British football fans react indifferently to Gaelic football, because the Irish added a qualifier—Gaelic—that makes it clear the definition of *football* is not being changed. In fact, many British Universities field successful Gaelic football teams ("British Universities…"). Therefore, the hatred between American football and British football likely stems from the two cultures' inability to sufficiently share a single word.

For many, choosing between *football* and *soccer* has never been troubling issue. In America, one always uses *soccer* to refer to the British sport and *football* to refer to the American sport. In Britain, one always uses *football* to reference the British sport and *American Football* for the American one. However, the context can change based upon one's friend circle or geography; for me, this context changes often. I visit England at least once a year, and often socialize with British family friends. Therefore, because I interact within both cultures, I reside on the frontline of this war. Unlike most people, I've witnessed people attack the sports on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

These tensions, between the sports and nationalities, culminated on June 12, 2010, at 7:30 PM. On this day, the United States and England battled each other in a

World Cup soccer match, and the teams tied 1-1. Many Americans viewed this as a British failure to excel in their own national support; my friends teased me with lines like "You couldn't even beat us in a sport we don't care about." This allowed my friends to challenge Britain's claim to the word *football*, as they also argued, "You can't choose the name of a sport you're not even good at". Conversely, if England had won, Britain probably would have claimed the US lacks the skills to play the *real* football. At every opportunity, each side desperately claws for leverage, in order to further their own cause.

There are two possible solutions to this conflict: (1) Americans reference their football as *American Football* or (2) British people accept both definitions of the word *football*. One can reasonably assume that Americans would never add a qualifier to their prized sport, for reasons other than the hassle of pronouncing three extra syllables. An overwhelming majority of the US uses *football* to refer to one sport only, and therefore many would view the qualifier as a waste of time. The latter solution may occur if the British gain more respect for American football, and this seems more likely, even if just in the long-run. However, even if either of these scenarios occurs, lives in both cultures remain unaffected. When people win a fight over money or land, they receive money or land. When the stakes involve acknowledging a single word's legitimacy, the winner gains nothing but pride. Therefore, if this is the case, what makes this conflict more than a trivial battle of etymology?

The football dilemma itself represents the roots of general Anglo-American relations. As discussed, many British people see Americans as arrogant word-stealers, and many Americans believe the British have no power to enforce the word's use. These two arguments are perfectly mirrored in public sentiment regarding the Anglo-American

relationship as a whole. A YouGov survey found that, "When asked to select a word they associated with America, a striking 40% of the British respondents chose 'bullying'" (Borger, Clark). Not only do many British people think that Americans unfairly stole the word *football*, they attribute this characteristic to America in general. This same principle applies to American views. In his book, *No Apology*, Mitt Romney writes, "England *[sic]* is just a small island. Its roads and houses are small. With few exceptions, it doesn't make things that people in the rest of the world want to buy" (Romney 39). In the same way that Americans don't believe Britain has the power to claim the word, one prominent American politician doubts British power in general. Therefore, the word *football* represents more than a linguistic disagreement; it symbolizes a national rivalry even 200 years after the Revolutionary War. In regards to themes, the roots of the *football* conflict relate directly to the roots of the Anglo-American rivalry. Thus, one can reasonably conclude that the two countries will only peacefully share the word *football* when they can peacefully respect each other as nations.

With an ocean between them, the citizens of each country rarely interact; a mutual understanding may take decades, even if dual-citizens like myself serve as ambassadors. This stalemate proves that words carry more than meaning; they can carry powerful and uncompromising beliefs. For one country to use a different word and give up *football* would be to forfeit the cultural belief on which that society stands—this will never occur. However, one day the fighting may end. On this day, my father's friend won't care if I use the word *soccer* over *football*, because although each word carries a different belief, the meaning to him remains identical.

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