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Sports Discourse Ideology in Arabic TV Commentary: A Case Study of the African Cup of Nations Semi-finals 2026

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Abstract

The present study aims at exploring the sports discourse ideology by applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to the TV commentary on football matches. Van Dijk's framework is employed to examine the semi-finals at the 2026 Africa Cup of Nations: Egypt vs. Senegal, and Morocco vs. Nigeria. The focus is laid on how the commentators build their narratives, and whether the discourse is biased for the Arab teams or maintains balance, objectivity, and sports values of respect like that to the rival and referee decisions. The results show that sports commentary does not only report the match reality, but also shapes the spectators' awareness and culture. This takes place through emotive language, repetition, and cultural references which should steer the audience toward sportsmanship and mutual respect. Based on the apparent ideology found in the commentary, it is recommended to expand research on this genre using different CDA methods, and not limiting them to political speeches. In addition, it is necessary to conduct comparative studies on the ideological differences among channels (Arab and non-Arab), in a bid to investigate the impact of the cultural and territorial context in shaping the Us and Them dichotomy.

Keywords: sports discourse, Critical discourse analysis (CDA), 2026 Africa Cup of Nations

1. Introduction:

Football is highly popular in the Arab countries, both in Africa and Asia. It enjoys wide viewership that transcends sporting activity to make a fundamental part of popular culture and national and collective identity. On the other hand, modern sports media has considerably boosted this public presence, mainly through specialized satellite channels, which have become a major mediator in shaping the Arab audience sporting experience as well as connecting viewers to regional and international football activities.

For instance, beIN Sports has emerged as the most prominent actor in sports broadcasting in the MENA region. Airing in Arabic, English, and French, the network managed to acquire exclusive broadcasting rights for top football tournaments. It enjoyed exclusive broadcasting rights for the Africa Cup of Nations in its 2015, 2017, 2019, 2023, and 2026 editions. In addition, it has held the exclusive rights for the AFC Asian Cup since 2014, including the 2019 and 2023 editions. Furthermore, it took the exclusive broadcasting rights for the FIFA World Cups held in Brazil (2014), Russia (2018), and Qatar (2022), enhancing its status as a major platform for global football viewership in the Arab world (beIN SPORTS, 2022).

The influence of the beIN Sports network is not only related to continental and international championships, but also to major European leagues, including the English Premier League, Spanish La Liga, French Ligue, and German Bundesliga. It has retained exclusive broadcasting rights for these leagues for over a decade in the MENA region. This sustained

monopoly has made the network a permanent actor in the Arab viewers' daily lives, consolidating its role as the chief source of high-level football content.

Due to its widespread reach, the network can also be viewed as Qatar's most important media arm in the Arab sports. It enjoys a clear influence on the general sporting mood and shapes public viewership priorities. It also generates significant profits through a system of pay-per-view broadcasting and exclusive rights. Thus, it is necessary to investigate its media discourse, particularly sports commentary, which constitutes one of the most significant elements in shaping the viewing experience and the Arab audience perception of football events.

Sports channels attempt to attract the widest possible Arab audience, mainly during national and continental tournaments joined by Arab national teams. In this context, the beIN Sports network relies on a set of techniques aimed at enhancing the viewer's connection to the sporting activity. One of its major methods is to choose a sports commentator from the same country as the participating national team.

Such a commentator is often given greater room to use enthusiastic expressions and emotive language which align with the audience sentiments, particularly in matches against non-Arab teams. This approach manifests itself in how the flow of the match is described, the voice tone is manipulated, and which vocabulary is chosen to express support and encouragement, creating a state of interaction between the match and the viewers.

This type of commentary increases public viewership, as commentary shifts from a sheer reporting into a means to bridge the gap between the audience and the national teams. At the same time, it reflects the channel's tendency to accommodate the cultural specificities of the Arab audience. It also shows the sports commentator's critical role in shaping the viewing experience as well as influencing how the audience receives such events. Therefore, the present paper attempts to analyze the two semi-final matches of the Africa Cup of Nations held in Morocco in 2026: Egypt vs. Senegal, and Morocco vs. Nigeria.

Research Problem

Sports discourse has drawn a great deal of analysis in continental events featuring Arab national teams, mainly in tournaments which gain massive viewership in the Arab world. It has become more obvious that sports commentary is not only concerned with reporting the realities of a match. In fact, it makes an integral part of the audience's viewing experience. It affects how the viewer comprehends events and is, thus, expected to shape a public culture of respect to sporting values. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze this discourse in a bid to determine to what extent commentators are biased toward Arab teams, and whether they maintain values of mutual respect to rival teams by granting the opponent fair praise. It also explores the respect for – and refrain from criticizing – referee decisions. This is supposed to promote a culture of respect to the other and uphold sporting values among the audience, such as sportsmanship and the acceptance of defeat.

Therefore, the present study attempts to identify the ideology of the commentators' discourse in two semi-finals of the 2026 Africa Cup of Nations held in Morocco. The first match was between Egypt and Senegal, commentated by Ali Mohamed Ali from Egypt, and refereed by Pierre Ghislain Atcho from Gabon. The second was between Morocco and Nigeria, commentated by Jawad Badda from Morocco, refereed by Daniel Laryea from Ghana.

Research Objectives

The main objective is to explore the Us and Them ideology in the sports commentary discourse during the 2026 Africa Cup of Nations, by looking into the following sub-objectives:

1. Identifying the extent of emphasis on the positive aspects in the performance of the Arab team "Us".
2. Identifying the extent of de-emphasis on the negative aspects in the performance of the Arab team "Us".
3. Identifying the extent of emphasis on the negative aspects in the performance of the non-Arab team "Them".
4. Identifying the extent of de-emphasis on the positive aspects in the performance of the non-Arab team "Them".
5. Identifying the extent of de-emphasis on the positive aspects regarding the performance of the referee "Them".
6. Identifying the extent of emphasis on the negative aspects regarding the performance of the referee "Them".

Research Questions

The primary question of the study is: How does the Us and Them ideology arise in the sports commentary discourse of the 2026 Africa Cup of Nations? Thus, the following sub-questions are raised:

1. To what extent is emphasis laid on the positive aspects in the performance of the Arab team "Us"?
2. To what extent is de-emphasis laid on the negative aspects in the performance of the Arab team "Us"?
3. To what extent is emphasis laid on the negative aspects in the performance of the non-Arab team "Them"?

4. To what extent is de-emphasis laid on the positive aspects in the performance of the non-Arab team “Them”?
5. To what extent is de-emphasis laid on the positive aspects regarding the performance of the referee “Them”?
6. To what extent is emphasis laid on the negative aspects regarding the performance of the referee “Them”?

Literature Review

Agbeleoba, Aragbuwa, and Fafiyebi (2025) studied the linguistic and discursive strategies used while commentating on the Nigerian national team – the "Super Eagles" – when they played in the 2023 Africa Cup of Nations. The authors analyzed emotive language, rhetorical images, repetition, and cultural references, in addition to their influence on the audience perception. The researchers employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to identify how certain narratives are made around the players and teams, as well as their relation to public expectations and cultural identity. The results showed that commentary does not only portray match events, but it also contributes to constructing narratives which affect emotions and national affiliations. It also encompasses implicit linguistic biases toward sporting moments or players.

Rafizah Rawian’s (2024) employed Jeffries' critical stylistic analysis to investigate the commentary on the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. It was concluded that any academic study of sports – including its language – must take into consideration that sport cannot be studied in isolation. Rather, it comes within the social, economic, and cultural aspects which shape our lives. It also represents a fundamental concept in academic studies. On the other hand, when non-favorite teams are included in prestigious tournaments like the World Cup, this highlights the ambitious nature of sport and the potential for unexpected outcomes. Within these dynamics, commentators, regardless of their geographical origins, play a vital role in constructing narratives and public perceptions.

The results indicated that TV commentary focused more on the sporting events themselves as well as the teams’ tactical performances, ignoring high levels of ideological nationalism. It was noted that it often reflected ordinary patriotism, such as mentioning team names and national anthems. Moreover, it focused on the appreciation of players across national borders, which reflected the tournaments’ global character. The study showed that latest developments in multi-angle sports broadcasting could alleviate the impact of traditional patriotic commentary on building the audience identity.

Kunert and Kuni (2023) investigated tension between entertainment and journalistic values in the live commentary on TV football matches from the German commentators’ viewpoint. The authors attempted to understand the ways commentators evaluated the significance of journalistic values, such as accuracy and objective analysis, in contrast with entertainment values, like storytelling and use of excitement, in addition to the factors which influence this type of balance during live broadcasting. The importance of this study stems from offering a direct insight from commentators about their dual role as public entertainers and media professionals – a topic not adequately explored previously. The researchers applied semi-structured interviews to a sample of 30 participants, including 28 TV football commentators, a radio commentator, and a media expert. The interviewees represented various media outlets in Germany, such as DAZN, Sky, and ZDF. The interviews were examined employing qualitative content analysis to identify common patterns in the commentators' perceptions of balance between entertainment and journalistic values, as well as to find other relevant factors like the station guidelines, match type, and the commentator’s location during the broadcasting.

It was shown that most commentators saw themselves companions to the public in reporting match events, prioritizing journalistic values while employing limited entertainment elements. They identified two main commentary styles: the "objective mediator," who focuses on conveying information and precise analysis; and the "emotional commentator," who emphasizes entertainment and excitement through emotive language which engages the audience. It was also indicated that the type of the match – like national team encounters – affected the extent of entertainment component usage, and that media station instructions differed among institutions, which granted commentators varying degrees of freedom in choosing style.

Furthermore, the results showed a crucial role by the actual context, such as the commentator's location in the studio or the stadium, determining the blend of values used in commentary. It was concluded that the audience appreciated commentators who struck a balance between good journalistic analysis and reasonable entertainment additions, which constituted a permanent challenge for sports commentators. It was also found that commentary methods might differ among media cultures, providing a wide scope for future research to explore the impact of sports commentary on public reception of sports events.

Hamidi (2024) analyzed the linguistic and technical discourse of sports commentary in Arabic, especially on football matches, stressing its role in spreading Modern Standard Arabic and raising sports awareness among Arab audiences. The study investigated the journalistic nature of sports commentary as a genre of intellectual journalism which targeted both the mind and the audience through analysis, explanation, and critique, rather than the mere momentary narration of events. The study attempted to identify the stylistic features used by Arab commentators in auditory text of the match, enriching

the Arabic language with new sports and technical terms and expressions, and boosting the public's ability to deeply understand the realities of the game. The researcher adopted a qualitative linguistic, textual, and stylistic methodology to analyze a set of sports commentaries. Focus was laid on linguistic characteristics and the adherence to Modern Standard Arabic. Thus, rhetorical tools were examined, such as dramatic narration, tactical analysis, and realistic description, while pursuing how commentators used tone, voice, and artistic style to deliver information in an effective and exciting manner.

The results showed that sports commentary in Arabic enjoyed an intellectual journalistic nature, which greatly relied on precise explanation and analysis, integrating creative and artistic elements to make it more attractive. It was also demonstrated that a commentator's success did not only depend on mastering the language, but it also had to do with ways to vary vocal tone and delivery. This is expected to enhance influence on the audience, supporting the transmission of information in a clear manner. In addition, it was found that sports commentary could spread sports awareness and deepen the public's understanding of the game, mainly when maintaining an appropriate balance between linguistic accuracy and stylistic creativity, thus raising the cultural and educational value of commentary. It was concluded that the training of sports commentators in both the linguistic and professional aspects was necessary to enhance their abilities to achieve effective, accurate and analytical performance. Attention to style and creative expressions – especially in Modern Standard Arabic – can make commentary a vital tool in promoting the Arabic language in sports journalism as well as a deeper sports culture among the public. Objectivity and different viewpoints remain essential to secure a comprehensive, unbiased picture of tournament events.

Horky (2029) analyzed TV coverage of major sports events, focusing on live commentary in the 2016 UEFA Euro. The aim was to explore how globalization and national identity were represented in commentary across 4 different countries, based on the social identity theory and self-categorization framework. This model explains how commentators can mitigate or enhance national affiliations in international sporting events. A mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative analysis was adopted. Quantitatively, linguistic elements in the audio commentary were counted and then assessed to identify any focus or even bias in terms of national identity. Qualitatively, commentaries were studied to find any denotations related to loyalty, nationalism, and cultural perceptions, as well as expressions connected to players' links to global or European identity. The analysis covered live commentary for 4 selected matches which represented 4 different countries.

2. Research Methodology

The present study adopts the descriptive-analytical approach, critically analyzing sports discourse in TV commentary during continental matches which involved Arab national teams. It attempts to show the features of the discourse employed by commentators and to what extent they are committed to sporting values – like respecting and granting fair praise to opponents, as well as respecting refereeing decisions – or emotional bias toward the Arab teams. This methodology fits the nature of the research, as it investigates the semantic and linguistic content of sports commentary, linking it to its media and cultural contexts.

The sample of the study consists of 2 semi-finals of the 2026 Africa Cup of Nations held in Morocco. The first match brought together the national teams of Nigeria and Morocco at the Prince Moulay Abdellah Sports Stadium in Rabat on Wednesday, January 14. It was led by central referee Daniel Laryea from Ghana, assisted by first assistant Zakhele Siwela from South Africa, second assistant Souru Phatsoane from Lesotho, and fourth official Samuel Uwikunda from Rwanda. The second match brought together the national teams of Senegal and Egypt at Ibn Batouta Stadium in Tangier on the same day. It was led by central referee Pierre Ghislain Atcho from Gabon, assisted by first assistant Boris Marlaise Ditsoga from Gabon as well, second assistant Steven Moutsassi Moyo from Congo, reserve assistant Amos Abegne Ndong from Gabon, and fourth official Jean-Jacques Ndala from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The Senegal vs. Egypt match ended in a 1-0 victory for the Senegalese team. Sadio Mané scored in the 78th minute with a shot from outside the penalty area. The goal stirred some controversy, with questions about a potential offside or handball before the goal. Later, nevertheless, many refereeing experts and observers confirmed its validity and the lack of any legal violation.

The Nigeria vs. Morocco match's regular time ended in a draw, and they went to 120 minutes without a winner. Then, the match was decided by penalty shootouts, ending with a victory for the Moroccans by 4 to 2. Player Nael El Aynaoui opened the scoring for Morocco, and Paul Onuachu of Nigeria responded with an equalizer. In the second kick, Moroccan Hamza Igamane missed as Nigerian goalkeeper Stanley Nwabali blocked it. Then, another Nigerian kick taken by Samuel Chukwueze was blocked by Moroccan goalkeeper Yassine Bounou. After that, Eliesse Ben Seghir scored for Morocco, and Fisayo Dele-Bashiru scored for Nigeria. Achraf Hakimi then succeeded in scoring for Morocco before Bruno Onyemaechi missed a Nigerian penalty that Bounou managed to block. Finally, Youssef En-Nesyri scored the decisive kick to grant Morocco the victory and qualification for the final.

To conduct critical analysis, the study adopted Van Dijk's Ideological Square, based on four fundamental principles: emphasizing positive aspects connected to "Us", de-emphasizing our negative aspects, emphasizing the negative aspects

connected to "Them", and de-emphasizing their positive aspects. It was employed to examine the sports commentaries during the two matches in terms of how the discourse is constructed, and whether it reflects a clear bias toward the Arabs team or offers a balanced commitment to sporting and professional values, including respect for the rivals and refereeing. This framework helps understand the linguistic, ideological, and semantic dimensions embedded in sports commentary as well as its potential role in shaping audience awareness and sports culture.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is based on Van Dijk's Ideological Square in the critical analysis of sports discourse, which focuses on four main dimensions: emphasizing positive traits of the self (the positives of "Us"), removing or de-emphasizing the negative traits of the self, emphasizing the negative traits of "Them," and removing or de-emphasizing the positive traits of "Them." This approach allows for studying how sports commentators process linguistic, semantic, and contextual events during commentary, and whether the discourse reflects a bias toward the Arab national team or a balanced respect for the opponent, in addition to the extent of their commitment to sporting values when dealing with refereeing decisions. Through this analysis, it is possible to uncover the commentary style and the extent of its influence in guiding audiences toward a sports culture that respects rivals and appreciates the value of fair play.

The ideological square highlights forms of power established through discourse among social and political classes (Van Dijk, 1993). More specifically, it reveals manifestations of ideology, dominance, social power, and inequality in relations between countries through football matches, in particular, and sports, in general, and how they can be embodied and renewed through linguistic practice in their social and political contexts (Van Dijk, 2001). Through those relationships between the addresser and the audience, ideological discourse in media texts is found to reproduce relations of social control and exploitation between sports commentary and the audience "the public" – mostly as an implicit but not explicit relationship (Van Dijk, 2011). However, this discourse contributes to drawing these relationships within the general scene of countries. Regarding ideology, CDA is based on four pillars according to the Van Dijk's Ideological Square, namely: emphasizing positive aspects connected to "Us", de-emphasizing the negative aspects connected to "Us", emphasizing the negative aspects connected to "Them", and de-emphasizing the positive aspects connected to "Them". In this ideological square, "Us" tends to be positive, while "Them" tends to be negative (Van Dijk, 2011).

Although Van Dijk's Ideological Square was initially developed in the context of political and news discourse, its analytical value has expanded considerably within contemporary Critical Discourse Studies. In his sociocognitive approach, Van Dijk (2016) argues that discourse plays a central role in shaping social representations, collective identities, and group perceptions. This perspective extends beyond political communication and provides a useful framework for examining how language contributes to the construction of social meanings in various media contexts, including sports media. From this viewpoint, sports commentary can be understood as a form of discourse through which audiences are encouraged to interpret events, teams, and competitors according to particular evaluative frameworks.

Recent studies have demonstrated the relevance of discourse analysis to sports communication. Longas Luque and Van Sterkenburg (2020), for example, showed how football-related media discourse may reproduce representations associated with race, ethnicity, and social identity. Similarly, Hornmoen and Knudsen (2024) found that football commentaries during the 2022 FIFA World Cup reflected broader national and cultural perspectives that shaped the interpretation of sporting events. These studies suggest that sports commentary is not merely descriptive but may also participate in the construction of identities, affiliations, and perceptions of the self and the other. Therefore, Van Dijk's Ideological Square remains an appropriate analytical framework for examining Arabic sports commentary and exploring how the distinction between "Us" and "Them" is discursively reproduced within major football tournaments.

3. Results

3.1 Sub-question One

Table (1). Extent of emphasis on the positive aspects in the performance of the Arab team "Us" in the sports commentary discourse

Commentator	Frequency	%	Duration
Egyptian Ali Mohammad Ali on Egypt vs. Senegal	63	58.5	9:22 (483 seconds)
Moroccan Jawad Badda on Morocco vs. Nigeria	44	41.2	8:03 (562 seconds)
Total	107	100	17:25

According to Table (1), the results of the commentators' performance analysis show that Ali used expressions emphasizing the positive aspects of the Egyptian team's performance many times during the match. It occurred with a frequency of 63 times, accounting for 58.8% of the total 107 comments. His discourse focused on the team's high fighting spirit and strong character on the pitch. He also referred to gradual development in the performance level from one match to another, calling the style of their play as positive, enthusiastic, and organized.

In addition, he is found to repeat phrases which emphasize the team's ability to achieve victory and score the decisive goal at any point. At closely spaced intervals, he referred to the solid defensive system, mainly that of the backline with its firm, committed performance.

Moreover, it is shown that the commentator specified several Egyptian players' performance in praise, including defender Yasser Ibrahim, midfielder Hazim Imam, and goalkeeper Mohammad El-Shenawy. However, this emphasis on the team's strengths contradicts the official statistics, which showed that possession was only 37% for Egypt in contrast with 63% for Senegal. Meanwhile, Egypt had only one corner kick (in the 84th minute), compared to 6 for Senegal. In terms of shots, Egypt had 3 (with just 1 on target), compared to 12 for (with 4 on target).

3.2 Sub-question Two

Table (2). Extent of de-emphasizing the negative aspects in the performance of the Arab team "Us" in the sports commentary discourse

Commentator	Frequency	%	Duration
Egyptian Ali Mohammad Ali on Egypt vs. Senegal	17	65.4	2:57 (177 seconds)
Moroccan Jawad Badda on Morocco vs. Nigeria	9	34.6	1:21 (81 seconds)
Total	26	100	3:78

According to Table (2), the content analysis shows that Ali, during his commentary on the Egyptian team's match, clearly referred to both the positive and negative aspects associated with the team's performance. He repeatedly pointed out that Senegal's greater possession was mainly attributed to physical factors, such as the exhaustion suffered by the Egyptian players due to their travel between the cities of Agadir and Tangier. In contrast, according to the commentator, the Senegalese team enjoyed an extra day of rest, reflecting their physical superiority during the course of the match.

Ali frequently noted that the Egyptian team's defensive errors were natural within the context of competitive matches, while emphasizing that the team maintained tactical organization. Furthermore, he highlighted that the Egyptian players delivered a realistically good performance despite the defeat. He stressed that the result should not cause sadness due to the difficult circumstances surrounding the match, considering that they played an impressing game given to those conditions.

As for the sole goal scored by the Senegalese team in the 77th minute, Ali showed skepticism about its validity. He said that Sadio Mané may have touched the ball with his hand before shooting it toward the goal, as well as the suspicion of an offside during the same attacking play. He made these controversial refereeing situations part of the reasons contributing to the team's loss.

On the other hand, the results indicated that Badda sought to mitigate the severity of the negative aspects connected with the poor physical level shown by some Moroccan players. In his commentary, he focused on the players' tactical and technical abilities as a compensatory asset for physical deficiency. He particularly referred to the condition of Achraf Hakimi, who had suffered from an injury, remarking that his decreased physical readiness did not reduce his threat on the pitch. Hakimi maintained influence on the flow of the game and kept his ability to make a difference at any point. Badda stressed that a player's impact is not only measured by complete physical readiness, but also by tactical effectiveness within the team's integrated performance.

The analysis also showed that Badda highlighted the Moroccan players' ability to manage their physical effort throughout the match by workload distribution and good positioning, even with their physical fitness being lower than that of the Nigerian players. This viewpoint reflects an analytical approach which relates tactical intelligence with fitness management, instead of total reliance on physical superiority, to account for the Moroccan team's performance.

3.3 Sub-question Three

Table (3). Extent of emphasizing the negative aspects in the performance of the non-Arab team "Them" in the sports commentary discourse

Commentator	Frequency	%	Duration
Egyptian Ali Mohammad Ali on Egypt vs. Senegal	9	45	1:01 (61 seconds)
Moroccan Jawad Badda on Morocco vs. Nigeria	11	55	1:31 (91 seconds)
Total	20	100	2:32

According to Table (3), the results show that the commentators sought to highlight the negative tactical and technical aspects of both teams, despite the apparent superiority of the Senegalese team during most of the match and the Nigerian team's outstanding performance. For example, Ali focused on the technical errors committed by the Senegalese players, particularly their excessive rush, which led to repeated fouls resulting in several yellow cards, attributing to weakness in tactical discipline and rhythm control.

The analysis also indicates that Ali stressed that, despite of their superiority in ball possession, the Senegalese team were unable to pose a genuine threat to the Egyptian goal. He called it "passive possession," indicating it did not translate into

clear offensive opportunities or actual pressure on the Egyptian defense, while the Egyptian team maintained a more dangerous position in terms of offensive play and use of opportunities.

In contrast, the results show that Badda focused on the tactical and physical aspects in the Nigerian team's performance. He argued that despite their good physical strength, the players did not have the ability to manage their physical effort in long matches. He argued that this defect negatively impacted their general performance, mainly in the second half of the match.

Furthermore, it is found that Badda referred to the Nigerian team's defensive line slowness, poor movement and positioning, considering slowness to be a clear flaw in the defense system. These gaps granted the Moroccan team a tactical advantage, chiefly by using the two sides – especially the left one – which facilitated building effective attacks and penetrating defenses.

3.4 Sub-question Four

Table (4). Extent of de-emphasizing the positive aspects in the performance of the non-Arab team "Them" in the sports commentary discourse

Commentator	Frequency	%	Duration
Egyptian Ali Mohammad Ali on Egypt vs. Senegal	38	66.7	4:24 (264 seconds)
Moroccan Jawad Badda on Morocco vs. Nigeria	19	33.3	2:23 (143 seconds)
Total	57	100	6:47

According to Table (4), the results show that the commentators agreed in their general analysis that the opposing teams possessed great individual skills. Moreover, as they have professional players who are active in prominent European leagues, both teams enjoyed high technical qualities. However, they pointed out that this skill-based superiority was not the same across all lines of play, as some issues were apparent in the backlines of both squads.

On the one hand, Badda emphasized the Nigerian national team's defensive weaknesses. For example, some defenders suffered from slow and poor movement, especially Calvin Bassey (No. 21), taking into consideration his poor positioning and limited speed. He argued that this weakness granted the Moroccan team attackers, particularly Ayoub El Kaabi, a clear advantage in exploiting space and speed to seize opportunities and, thus, score goals.

In addition, Badda stressed a major gap in the Nigerian style, especially on the sides and wings where vast spaces in these areas were left. For Badda, this tactical flaw helped the Moroccan team in building attacks from the sides, particularly through the left wing, assisting the penetration of the Nigerian defenses and the creation of direct scoring opportunities.

On the other hand, Ali presented a critical analysis of the Senegalese team's performance. He argued that while they enjoyed good technical quality, the players suffered from a clear flaw in the backline. This defensive weakness reduced the team's effectiveness in spite of its high ball possession.

Ali also described the situation as "passive possession," arguing that such control did not translate into serious strikes or real opportunities toward the Egyptian goal. He said that, although the Senegalese team held the ball for long periods, they failed to impose an offensive threat. However, he remarked that the Egyptian team was more capable of constructing effective attacks, threatening the goal, and scoring at any point.

Finally, the results reveal that Ali pointed to a high number of fouls committed by the Senegalese team. Such repeated mistakes resulted in expulsions or granted the rival serious opportunities, which reflected a weakness in the Senegalese team's mental and defensive discipline during certain periods of the game.

3.5 Sub-question Five

Table (5). Extent of de-emphasizing the positive aspects in the performance of the match referee "Them" in the sports commentary discourse

Commentator	Frequency	%	Duration
Egyptian Ali Mohammad Ali on Egypt vs. Senegal	2	66.7	0:09 (9 seconds)
Moroccan Jawad Badda on Morocco vs. Nigeria	1	33.3	0:13 (31 seconds)
Total	3	100	0:22

According to Table (5), the analysis shows that Ali tried to de-emphasize the positive aspects associated with the referee's performance. Although he noted that the referee was seen as a World Cup-level official, Ali stressed that this did not prevent him from committing grave refereeing errors. Examples included the failure to issue certain yellow and red cards for the Senegalese players' excessive rushing – a factor he argued to have led the referee to lose control over certain periods of the match.

Ali linked these lenient refereeing decisions to the disorder seen in the 55th minute of the match. He pointed to the tension on the pitch and players' increased objections, which reflected the referee's weak management of disciplinary situations, impacting the flow of encounter.

In contrast, Badda adopted a more conservative approach toward the referee's performance, avoiding any direct criticism or questioning of the integrity of decisions. Nevertheless, he indirectly argued that the referee did not use the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) technique in the 60th minute, when a Nigerian defender touched the ball with his hand inside the penalty area.

It is shown that although he noticed this refereeing situation, Badda emphasized that the referee had a good general performance. This analytical approach leant toward de-escalation and refrained from exaggerating refereeing errors, contrary to the critical argument opted for by the other commentator.

3.6 Sub-question Six

Table (6). Extent of emphasizing the negative aspects in the performance of the match referee "Them" in the sports commentary discourse

Commentator	Frequency	%	Duration
Egyptian Ali Mohammad Ali on Egypt vs. Senegal	8	88.9	1:05 (65 seconds)
Moroccan Jawad Badda on Morocco vs. Nigeria	1	11.1	0:14 (14 seconds)
Total	9	100	1:19

According to Table (6), Ali showed an apparent critical approach toward the referee's decisions. He focused on questioning some refereeing judgments, linking them to a direct impact on the course of the game. He objected after a goal was scored, expressing doubt over its validity and arguing that the referee should resort to the VAR. As it did not occur, he considered this a flaw in the refereeing process.

Ali frequently protested during the match, especially in the final minutes. For instance, in the 39th minute, he said that the referee should be stricter in his decisions, as the lack of firmness negatively affected the discipline of the game. In the 87th minute, he mocked the referee's performance, claiming that he is "wasting time!" – referring to the way he handled stoppage time and the rhythm of the game. In the 89th minute, he described the referee's choices as unclear, arguing that the referee's whistles were neither consistent nor apparent. Finally, in the 90th minute, he questioned the validity of the goal, maintaining this objecting discourse until the end of the encounter.

As for Badda, the commentary analysis shows a different approach based on neutrality and reservation with regard to refereeing. He avoided direct reference to the referee's decisions and focused his discourse on calling on the Moroccan players not to object and discussing their performance on the pitch. He was not preoccupied with the referee's choices, despite the handball committed by a Nigerian player in the penalty area in the 60th minute. This demonstrates Badda's adoption of a de-escalatory discourse seeking to maintain technical focus and shunning refereeing disputes.

3.7 Primary Question

Table (7). "Us and "Them" ideology in the sports commentary discourse of the 2026 Africa Cup of Nations

	Commentator's attitude	Frequency	%	Duration	%
1	Emphasizing the positive aspects in the performance of the Arab team "Us"	107	48.2	17:25	55.3
2	De-emphasizing the negative aspects in the performance of the Arab team "Us"	26	11.8	3:78	12.1
3	Emphasizing the negative aspects in the performance of the non-Arab team "Them"	20	9.0	2:32	7.4
4	De-emphasizing the positive aspects in the performance of the non-Arab team "Them"	57	25.7	6:47	20.7
5	De-emphasizing the positive aspects in the performance of the match referee "Them"	3	1.4	0:22	0.7
6	Emphasizing the negative aspects in the performance of the match referee "Them"	9	4.05	1:19	3.8
Total		222	100	31:23	100

4. Discussion

The results of the study indicate a clear agreement between the discourse patterns in the sports commentary investigated and Van Dijk's Ideological Square: emphasizing our positive aspects, de-emphasizing our negative aspects, emphasizing their negative aspects, and de-emphasizing their positive aspects. Both commentators' discourse relied heavily on the strategy of enhancing the positive aspects of "Us," both in terms of frequency and time allocation. This reflects a discursive practice seeking to build a positive mental representation of the Arab teams which represents the "collective self" and, thus, aligns with the first principle of Van Dijk's square.

In the same context, the strategy of de-emphasizing or marginalizing the negative aspects related to "Us" was obvious, but at a lower percentage. It served a complementary ideological function of protecting the positive self-image through justification, downplaying mistakes, or attributing them to external factors like refereeing errors or match conditions. This pattern endorses Van Dijk's proposition that the ideological discourse takes place not only through highlighting but also through intentional ignoring and selective silence.

With reference to the image of the "Other," the results reveal evident strategies of stressing the negative aspects of "Them" and denying their positive aspects, concerning both the opposing team and the referee. This obviously reflects the third

and fourth principles of Van Dijk's ideological square. In the commentators' discourse, the "Other" is often represented as an obstacle or unfair party, consolidating a symbolic conflict duality. This takes place in a sporting context supposed to be based on professional competition, rather than ideological dispute.

It is also indicated that discursive time was a vital ideological tool in applying Van Dijk's square. Not only was bias found in the choice of vocabulary and descriptions, but also in the distribution of time dedicated to each party. While the discussion of the positive aspects of "Us" was prolonged, the time spent on the positive performance of "Them" was reduced. This reflects what is called cognitive control over the receivers' Mental Models by Van Dijk, directing the audience's perception toward particular interpretations of events.

Therefore, the present study confirms that sports commentary discourse reproduces Van Dijk's Ideological Square in an indirect manner through overlapping linguistic, temporal, and evaluative tools. This makes such commentary an ideological discourse disguised in the form of entertainment. It underlines the theoretical proposition that ideology is not only found in explicit political speeches, but also in everyday media interactions, including sports discourse as an active aspect which shapes identity and collective affiliation.

5. Conclusion

Football enjoys exceptional popularity across the Middle East and Africa, particularly during major tournaments such as the Africa Cup of Nations, the AFC Asian Cup, and the FIFA World Cup qualifiers. In these events, television commentary becomes an integral part of the viewing experience rather than a simple description of what happens on the field. Sports commentators contribute to shaping how audiences interpret matches, players, teams, and even the countries represented in competition. For this reason, sports commentary deserves greater scholarly attention as a form of media discourse with significant social and cultural influence.

The present study sought to examine whether Arabic sports commentary reproduces ideological patterns through the representation of "Us" and "Them." Using Van Dijk's Ideological Square, the analysis focused on the semi-final matches of the 2026 Africa Cup of Nations involving Egypt, Morocco, Senegal, and Nigeria. The findings revealed recurring discursive tendencies that favored the Arab teams through emphasizing their positive attributes, downplaying their weaknesses, highlighting the shortcomings of both referees and opponents, and reducing attention to their strengths.

These findings establish a clear connection between the study's research problem and its theoretical framework. The concern raised at the outset of the study was whether sports commentary merely reports events or actively constructs particular interpretations of those events. The results indicate that commentary is not entirely neutral and that ideological positioning can emerge through language choices, evaluative expressions, repetition, and the allocation of discursive attention. In this respect, Van Dijk's model proved useful in explaining how ideological meanings may be embedded within sports discourse.

The study also demonstrates that the relevance of Van Dijk's approach extends beyond the political and news contexts in which it was originally developed. The patterns identified in the commentary suggest that sports broadcasting can similarly function as a site where identities, affiliations, and symbolic distinctions between groups are constructed and reinforced. This highlights the value of critical discourse analysis in examining sports media and broadens the scope of its application within communication and media studies.

At the same time, the findings should be interpreted within the limits of the study. The analysis was restricted to two matches from a single tournament and focused on the discourse of two commentators. While these cases provided rich material for qualitative analysis, they do not represent the full diversity of Arabic sports commentary across different tournaments, broadcasters, countries, and sporting contexts.

The study further highlights an important research gap concerning audience reception. Although the analysis identified ideological patterns within the commentary itself, it did not examine how audiences interpret, negotiate, or respond to these messages. Given the massive popularity of football in Arab societies, sports commentary may influence public perceptions not only of teams and players but also of other nations, cultures, and peoples represented in sporting competitions. Understanding this influence requires direct engagement with audiences through surveys, interviews, experiments, and reception studies.

Accordingly, future research should continue examining sports commentary through content analysis and critical discourse analysis across a wider range of tournaments and media platforms. Particular attention should be given to audience-centered studies that investigate the impact of Arabic-language sports commentary on viewers' attitudes, interpretations, and perceptions of sporting rivals and other societies. Such research would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the social role of sports media and help address a significant gap in the current literature

Recommendations

Based on the above results, the study makes the following recommendations:

- Expand the scope of research addressing sports discourse by employing critical discourse analysis, rather than limiting these methodologies to political discourse, given the evident presence of ideology.
- Conduct comparative research on ideological differences in sports commentary discourse between Arab and international channels to explore the impact of identity and cultural contexts on shaping the Us and Them dichotomy.
- Adopt "discourse duration" analysis as an indicator complementary to verbal frequencies, taking into consideration its high explanatory ability to uncover implicit ideological bias.
- Utilize Van Dijk's Ideological Square in examining other sports discourses, based on its effectiveness in this field, as in pre-match or post-match analysis studios, sports talk shows, and digital coverage.

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Author Contributions

All authors contributed significantly to the development of the study. They reviewed the manuscript critically for important intellectual content, approved the final version for publication, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Saddam Suleiman Salman Almashaqbeh initiated the research idea and played a leading role in conceptualizing the study. He was primarily responsible for developing the analytical perspective of the research and conducting the systematic analysis of sports commentary throughout the different stages and minutes of the matches examined in the study. He also contributed to the interpretation of the findings and the overall intellectual direction of the manuscript.

Ahmad Ali Oreqat was responsible for designing and refining the methodological framework of the study. He supervised the implementation of the research procedures, ensured the methodological rigor of the investigation, and contributed to the evaluation of the analytical approach adopted in the study. His role was essential in maintaining the scientific validity and consistency of the research design.

Mohammad Anwar Al-Taher contributed substantially to the linguistic development of the manuscript. He was responsible for the academic editing and English-language refinement of the text, assisted in the interpretation and presentation of the quantitative findings, and managed all correspondence and communication with the journal during the submission, review, and publication processes.

Rafif Faisal contributed to the analysis of the match minutes in accordance with the established research methodology and coding procedures. She also participated in reviewing the analytical outcomes, verifying the consistency of the data interpretation, and proofreading the manuscript to enhance its academic quality and coherence.

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