

SHANGHAI
2018

LOST IN TRANSLATION

语义流失

Translating the rules is one thing, but how does our game's eccentric vernacular come out sounding in Mandarin?
FRANK SWEET explains.



FULL STRETCH: Paddy Ryder and Jarrod Witts contest a ball-up in last season's historic first clash in Shanghai.

Hold on – how are you going to translate ‘specky’ into Mandarin?” Standing on the 50m arc of the immaculately manicured Jiangwan Stadium, moderate

Shanghai smog hanging hot and uneasy on the morning of the AFL’s stunning thrust into the Asian unknown, Kelli Underwood’s question was as curly as it is, well, surprisingly common.

This was the second time I would call the footy in Chinese. Back in 2015, while trawling Port Adelaide’s website in the hope of finding a job posting, I happened on a dusty old banner, presumably unclicked, that read: ‘Are you Port Adelaide’s next Chinese commentator?’

‘Not what I had in mind,’ I thought, as I sent in my audition tape – a breathless 30-second call that must have sounded to a native speaker like a drunken villager with a mouth full of noodles rambling about kicking olives (‘Aussie Rules’ – àoshì gǎnlǎnqiú – translates literally as ‘Australian-style olive ball’).

Someone at the club must have understood something, though, as I was invited to the commentary competition final at Adelaide Oval, along with seven Chinese natives, to call a quarter of a Port versus Fremantle match.

I didn’t win, but two years later I got the call from the AFL to go to Shanghai as one-third of the AFL’s specialist Mandarin commentary team – again, not what I had in mind, but worth chasing this niche dragon into the Middle Kingdom.

In the fortnight preceding my international commentary debut, of all the intrigue, of all the whys, hows and wows from friends, family and apparently Kelli Underwood, the business of precisely translating those curious idiosyncrasies of the Aussie Rules lexicon was quite clearly a matter of importance for all Australians, not just me.

Introducing the rules and tactics to our new audience was one thing, but conveying the semantic minutia of ‘baaaaaaallllll!’ and ‘screeeamer!’ was something the Australian public clearly felt strongly about and would become my greatest responsibility as a de facto ambassador of the game.

“Well, you could say something like ‘zhuàngguān!’, which translates to English literally as ‘spectacular!’,” I replied to Underwood on the ABC’s Grandstand AFL program.



HISTORY-MAKERS: The Power and Suns burst through the banner together at Jiangwan Stadium last season.

“But you’d be losing that certain emphasis. I’m planning on going with ‘tài niú le!’, or ‘how particularly bovine!’”

Without going right into it, ‘how particularly bovine’ is a contraction of a phrase that refers to a cow’s reproductive organs and bestows admiration and acclaim on the subject: in this case, the specky taker. It roughly translates to ‘you little ripper’, such is the incompatibility of our two languages.

“**Aussie Rules translates as Australian-style olive ball**”

If you’ve ever introduced the game of Aussie Rules to anyone, you’ll be acutely aware of the complex rules and tactics that we, as native fans, take for granted.

Bring one of the world’s toughest languages into it, and the AFL’s strategy to engage China – that fiercely self-reliant land with 5000 years of continual history to prove it – as a potential mega-market seemed as harebrained as it was thrilling.

But when Jiangwan Stadium opened for business, with local and foreign fans flooding into the arena to the iconic strains of Icehouse’s Iva Davies soaring over the PA, it was difficult to begrudge the China experiment.

Now in its second year, and featuring a greatly improved Gold Coast side, the annual Shanghai match promises only to grow stronger as our strange game begins to take root in a stranger land.

Just what shape this fascinating exercise in sporting diplomacy might take will depend largely on the AFL’s commitment to engaging its Chinese counterpart consistently and enthusiastically.

Should the ‘experiment’ evolve into an ongoing fixture, we could indeed be looking at something of a bovine evolution for our great game, not to mention a niche career for us up in the box. ●

Frank Sweet (left) has studied and worked in China and speaks advanced Mandarin.

