

# Chapter 17: Research Remix: Soundwriting Studies of the English Language

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## 7. Garrett Simpson's Discourse Ethnography: University Swim Team

Garrett Simpson considers how a college swim team uses a specialized discourse to meet its athletic and team building goals.

### Transcript

*[Coach yells indistinctly, loudly at first and then quieter under the following narration.]*

**Garrett Simpson:** It may seem a bit odd to study language use in a community where the majority of one's time is spent with their head under water, but there are important insights that can be gained from doing just that. What you're hearing is a typical afternoon at Bost Pool on the campus of Gardner-Webb University. Coaches are yelling directions, times, and encouraging athletes, while some athletes are calling out to one another in support. This is how Manning, one of the men's swim team captains at Gardner-Webb describes the daily practice dynamic.

**Manning:** One way we like to challenge each other is to essentially just yell at each other to motivate one another.

**Garrett:** Encouragement is a big part of language use within this community. This seems natural considering the lofty expectations that this group shares. The focus of both the women's and men's teams is the CCSA Swimming Championships. This meet serves as the culmination of their season and a determiner of their success. This is how one of Gardner-Webb's swim coaches describes each of the team's expectations for the end of the year.

**Coach:** I think some of the shared goals are, with respect to conference, on the men's side, trying to attain a championship, and on the women's side, moving up an additional place, similar to how we did last season.

**Garrett:** Both coaches and swimmers know that reaching these goals won't be attained easily. As far as coaches are concerned, motivating these athletes isn't always a cookie-cutter thing. Coach Stanfield points out that some athletes respond better to certain types of motivation.

**Coach:** I can be an angry coach at times. Some people that I work with need that angry tone.

**Garrett:** If you listen closely, you can hear a great example of a coach taking a stern tone with one of his swimmers.

**Coach:** *[voice a bit indistinct from field recording]* You were dead even with him, but I made you race him by yourself. Now you are letting him crush you. Do not let him crush you.

**Garrett:** Not all athletes respond well to this type of tone. Sara, a newcomer on the team, had this to say:

**Sara:** No, I don't really handle it well. I would rather them be encouraging and positive.

**Garrett:** Thankfully for the athletes, juggling this relationship is something that the coaches are very familiar with.

**Coach:** Taking each person . . . you can't just broadcast the general theme for 20 athletes and expect it to work for all 20 of them, so there's a certain tone, and there's a certain time for that tone, with respect to what we're doing.

**Garrett:** This balance between different coaching styles is not uncommon in collegiate athletics, however one thing that is unique about the way the swim team uses language is what gets them through the practices.

**Manning:** And every day our practice is centered on what's written on the board. At first glance, to a normal person, you would see that, and it would look like another language, but to us, it kind of explains what we're gonna do.

**Garrett:** By board, he means a white dry erase marker board, filled with an amalgamation of shorthand writing mixed with numbers and symbols, all written in different colors. The relationship between these things would truly be a mystery to someone outside of the group, but when the swimmers see this text, they know exactly what to do.

**Manning:** It actually follows the FITT principle, which is Frequency, Intensity, Type, and Time. And you know, that's what gets us through the practice and tells us what we need to do.

**Garrett:** While everyone in the group may not be able to explain it in such specialized terms, they definitely understand what the purpose of the board is, and what it communicates. The athlete's understanding of the practice on the board is a key factor in what might be the most powerful aspect of language in this community: its efficiency. By efficiency, I mean its power to communicate a lot in a very short span of time.

**Manning:** We have a lot of just one-word phrases that can mean so much. In swimming, you don't really get that much rest, so a coach can look at me as I'm on the wall for my five seconds of rest and say, "tempo." When he says, "tempo," I know I need to increase my stroke rate. I need my strokes to be shorter—that means that I need to fix my body position. It means a lot of different things.

*[Different male voices alternately say the following phrases, one at a time, clearly excerpted from larger contexts.]*

**Male voices:** "a controlled pace"; "pace clock"; "tempos"; "leave on the bottom or top"; "heart rate speed"; "strong swim"; "swim controlled"; "5 under your max heart rate"; "specific heart rate"; "paces"

**Garrett:** It's safe to say there is a vast body of specific language used within this community, but for those within it, it is essential to accomplish what they want and sufficient to communicate what they need.

**Coach:** They know the difference between a strong effort, a hard effort and a "go" or an all-out effort. They know exactly what I am looking for—for a 100, for a 25, for a 200—it doesn't have to be broken down, "Hey, you have to go your fastest speed here." I can just write, "heart rate speed for a 200 free," and they know they gotta go 4 to 5 under and they gotta check their heart rate at the end of it.

**GS:** An outsider may never understand what a term like "pace" or "heart rate speed" means, but for the swimmers in this community, that's okay. They've got work to do. In the end, their hope is that the results do the talking for them.

**Manning:** Our main goal this year would be to win conference.

**Garrett:** If someone really wanted to understand the lexis of swimming, all you would need to do is ask. That is, if you are willing to learn “in between 50s.” Since the Gardner-Webb swim team was so gracious to allow me to research this project, I’ll let them sign us off.

*[energetic chant, indistinct words]*