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**The House that Words Built: How Language Shapes Baseball Legends**

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**Abstract**

This study explores how the language of newspapers and magazines helped shape the legends of baseball stars, such as Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Willie Mays, Mark McGwire, Barry Bonds, and others. Certain techniques and approaches are often used, across a variety of players who made their mark in different decades, crafted by talented writers and speakers. The purpose of these approaches is to engrave or imprint words and images in the readers' minds—ones they will remember in positive, often inspiring ways. These techniques include alliteration; "allness" orientations, especially the use of superlatives; similes and metaphors; and syntax. This paper next examines larger issues that function at whole-discourse levels, including introductions, point of view, contrast and conflict, and language as an accurate (or inaccurate) map of reality.

**Introduction**

As a six-year-old in my First Grade classroom, Mrs. Thelma Bone, my teacher, held a small, plain, orange-colored, hard-back book, as she read aloud: "SMACK! The bat hit the ball. It sailed far over the center field fence. IT . . . was a HOME RUN! The Babe trotted slowly around the bases...."

This was not all. George Herman Ruth was also the rootless child submerged in the huge city of Baltimore, the grim reality of the orphanage and its kindly Catholic brothers, who helped him survive and even thrive. When Mrs. Bone finished the book, I read it, myself—when someone else had not beaten me to it. And then I read it again and again. Such was my introduction to the power of words that shaped my perceptions of Babe Ruth—a mortal revered as God. Such was the house that Ruth built.

This article explores how language functions to create baseball legends, in effect, exploring the house that words built. While every baseball legend has its own story, I will focus on *how* language was used "across cases" and illustrate my findings with specific examples and players—mostly the standard legends, such as Ruth, Gehrig, Mays, and McGwire. I also will include somewhat "anomaly legends," such as Roy Campanella, Roger Maris, Roberto Clemente, and Barry Bonds, each of whom represent unique cases of baseball legends.

**Methodology**

This study's primary sources consist of language from the most widely-read and widely-quoted newspaper and magazine articles that appeared during the rise (and/or fall) of each star. I focus on the original articles reported in *Time Magazine* (which began in 1923) and has been a beacon of baseball reporting, widely-read, and influential. Other sources include *The Sporting News*, and *Sports Illustrated*. This study focuses on the "critical incidents" of a baseball legend's life, those situations that extended or cemented an individual's reputation, such as Roy Campanella's car accident, Roger Maris's 61st home run, or Roberto Clemente's plane crash.

This material was read, re-read, and coded mainly through the lenses of General Semantics and Critical Discourse Analysis. The first section, "Small Ball," describes a variety of rhetorical and stylistic techniques at the word and sentence-levels of writing that I have found to be most common in all of the samples of discourse involving baseball legends. Most of the articles explored contain several different categories of analysis.

In communicating the sky-highs and lead-pipe lows of baseball's immortals, certain techniques and approaches are often used, across a variety of players who made their mark in different decades, crafted by different writers and speakers. The purpose of these approaches is to engrave or imprint words and images in the readers' minds—ones they will remember in positive, often inspiring ways. These techniques include alliteration; "allness" orientations,

especially the use of superlatives; similes and metaphors; and how words are located within sentences to achieve maximum impact.

The final section of this paper, “Rhetorical Grand Slams,” focuses on larger issues, those that function at whole-discourse levels, from the paragraph to the entire article. These techniques include introductions; point of view; contrast and conflict; and language as a map of reality.

### **Small Ball: Building Legends at the Word and Sentence-Levels**

The following exploration of techniques are often over-looked because they are, well, “small”—but only in the sense that they occur at the word and sentence levels, whether in print or in oral language. Used wisely, they can carry considerable heft in determining how we react to language and the people and events it represents.

#### **Alliteration**

The first common stylistic element to mention is **alliteration** – the repetition of sounds, in close proximity to each other. This is one of the simplest techniques. In 1927, *Time Magazine* reported on Babe Ruth’s 60<sup>th</sup> homerun in an article titled, “Swat,” consisting of only three short paragraphs.<sup>1</sup> Here is the opening line of this report:

*Cheering, screaming frantic fanatics flooded George Herman (Babe) Ruth with the wildest ovation ever accorded a baseball player.*

One of the most original examples of alliteration I have found, “cheering” & “screaming” subtly echo two “long ē” sounds, before the reader is smacked with three “f sounds” in rapid succession. Here are a few other examples:

- Mays covers ground with limber-legged speed.<sup>2</sup>
- Amazing Willie Mays.<sup>3</sup>
- Henry Thompson was booting oftener than a cavalryman’s cobbler.<sup>4</sup>
- Cannons roared and rockets seared the summer sky.<sup>5</sup>
- Campanella . . . bolted the bases with a sprinter’s furious stride.<sup>6</sup>

The effect of alliteration is one of sheer ease--breeziness, singing--a mild form of joy in swimming smoothly along through a written phrase.

Another extremely common technique is the use of “allness” orientations—phrases that cover *all* time, *all* ground, and leave no room for anything else. Allness is ALL or NOTHING. Allness portrays the ultimate, extreme border of reality: there is nothingness beyond it. There is no middle ground.

Allness is often (but not always) expressed in the form of *superlatives*—players who throw the ball the fastest; hitters who hit the ball the farthest; catchers who catch the wildest pitches. In short, the ultimate--the best ever. When Mark McGwire hit his then-record-breaking 62<sup>nd</sup> homer, it was described as the “shortest, lamest homer of the year.”<sup>7</sup> In this same article about Ruth’s 60<sup>th</sup> homer, a sage baseball writer, Frederick G. Lieb, is quoted as saying, “It is doubtful if anyone in that crowd will ever live to see another baseball player hit his 60<sup>th</sup> home run in a 154-game season.”<sup>8</sup>

Here are a few other examples of allness (all from *Time Magazine*):

- Every time he went to bat he felt that all the baseball fans in the world could hear him creak. (Gehrig)<sup>9</sup>
- He never makes an unnecessary move. (Campanella)<sup>10</sup>
- Bottle-green eyes smolder malevolently, and thin lips curl in a perpetual pout. (Maris)<sup>11</sup>
- Maris has built an inviolable wall around himself.<sup>12</sup>
- Nobody ever hit a ball so hard. (Ruth)<sup>13</sup>
-

- If ever a man was set up for failure, it was McGwire.<sup>14</sup>

### **Similes and Metaphors**

The uses of simile and metaphor are also a staple of communicating about baseball legends. Simile is a direct comparison, using the terms, “like” or “as.” In describing the faltering New York Giants, one writer noted that “Such seasoned pitchers as Sal Maglie (note the alliteration?) and Larry Jansen were giving away runs “as if they were CARE packages.”<sup>15</sup> Note that we do not hear much about CARE packages any more, but this was written in 1954, during more prosperous, altruistic times. Thus, similes and metaphors can reveal one’s values, can serve as a window into core or dominant beliefs of the times in which they were written.

Metaphors (on the other hand) are indirect comparisons that *assume* for readers the legitimacy of the items in comparison, because they are stated as nearly statements of fact, often with a form of the verb, *to be*, such as *was*, *were*, *am*, *are*, and *is*. Metaphors allow writers to burn memorable images in readers’ minds, as well as to make the unknown more knowable. To describe the “Negro-American and National League circuits,” one writer stated: “Their buses were rolling dormitories: seats, aisles and luggage racks did double duty as beds.”<sup>16</sup> If a bus can *be* a dormitory, can Babe Ruth’s head be eaten for breakfast and his legs dance on Broadway? When comparing Roger Maris to Babe Ruth, one sportswriter described the Bambino as “*a rollicking, muffin-headed giant (6 ft. 2 in., 230 lbs.) with the slender legs of a showgirl....*”<sup>17</sup> Well, maybe.

The very title of Joel Stein’s article, “Long Live the King,” describing Mark McGwire’s 62<sup>nd</sup>, record-breaking home run, assumes for readers that McGwire is the “king”—not Ruth, not Maris.<sup>18</sup> Describing how Willie Mays sparked his lagging fellow New York Giants in 1954, one *Time Magazine* sports writer stated that, “Willie’s personal bonfire soon ignited all the Giants.”<sup>19</sup> Readers then learn that Mays lived in an apartment that was “little more than a Willie Mays throw from the Polo Grounds.” After Mays recovered from a minor injury, we learn that he “now functions with his old, Buddha’s efficiency.” Of course, not all metaphors work well. I do not tend to think of Buddha, sitting motionless as stone, rounded and plump from eternal meditation, as being “efficient.”

### **Location, Location, Location (of Words)**

Another common element in writing about baseball legends resides in the *placement* of words within phrases and sentences—of main ideas and subordinate ideas; of general or abstract statements, and specific, concrete, imagistic statements. The old saying among theater folks is, “Save something for the last act.” The same holds true in writing. Similar to the most dramatic part of a stage play or film, the most important, emphatic location in a sentence or paragraph is the *end*. This works because all of the words, one by one, phrase by phrase, pause by pause, lead the reader to the end—for the biggest bang.

The next-most-important place in writing resides at the *beginning* of the sentence and paragraph—bookends, if you will, where memory most lingers. The vast middle is just that—forgettable. The middle location—not only in discourse, but also in novels, drama, film, poetry, and advertising—is the least emphatic and hence the least effective. Consider the following examples of writings about baseball legends:

- Last week, for the first time since that faraway day, the Yankees started a game without Lou Gehrig.<sup>20</sup>
- A rollicking, muffin-headed giant (6 ft. 2 in., 230 lbs.) with the slender legs of a showgirl, Ruth was the finest baseball player who ever lived.<sup>21</sup>

A related technique is for the writer to pack the sentence with details, both before and after the subject of the sentence: “In those 14 years, honest Lou Gehrig, the sort of player managers dream about, made a fetish of his endurance record.”<sup>22</sup> Here, before we get to the subject, “Lou Gehrig,” we learn of the time span and his honesty—and then we are interrupted again, with the observation that managers wish for such players—before we can complete the thought, that Gehrig was obsessed with his endurance record.

A common variation of this construction—which creates emphasis and a bit of drama—is to insert details *between* the subject and verb: “Sportswriters, viewing his feeble performance, wrote his batting obituary—for all the world to read—before the season started.”<sup>23</sup> Note also that two details are added *after* the main clause.

Such packing of dense detail creates “more bang for the buck,” because the small pieces of information occur close to each other, thus enabling readers’ minds to form a larger or “greater” unit of meaning. For example, consider the load of detail displayed in the quote below, from the same article about Gehrig:

It was the year everyone was fascinated by a new craze called crossword puzzles—Jack Dempsey was World’s Heavyweight Champion, What Price Glory was playing on Broadway, and Ty Cobb was still in his prime—when Manager Miller Huggins of the New York Yankees, one fine day in June, 1925, stepped up to a clumsy, rosy-cheeked rookie his scouts had picked up on the Columbia campus. “Gehrig,” he muttered, “you take Wally Pipp’s place at first base today.” Last week, for the first *time since that faraway day, the Yankees started a game without Lou Gehrig.*<sup>24</sup>

The function of these details is to create some context of the period in which Gehrig began his long, consecutive playing days—to impress upon readers—with images of popular culture that they would likely recall—the sheer distance in time that Gehrig had played without stopping—2,130 straight games. Readers will remember and repeat these details—another small but necessary way that language shapes legends.

### Rhetorical Grand Slams

The following techniques occur at “larger” levels of discourse: paragraphs, blocks of paragraphs, and whole articles. Consequently, they usually connect with readers at a longer-lasting, deeper level, than words or sentences (unless these smaller units are so powerful that they are often repeated over long periods of time).

### Leading Off

If the role of a lead-off hitter is to reach base by any means possible, we can safely say that the introduction of stories about baseball is the same—to get to first base, or beyond, in the reader’s mind. The opening paragraph is crucial in journalistic writing. Some writers cannot even begin their piece without first fashioning their lead, while others compose it last--after they have seen where the writing has taken them. Still others shuttle back and forth, from lead to text to lead, refining as they proceed. How a piece begins in sports writing, especially those pieces relaying critical incidents in fledgling or established ball players, is just as important (or more so) as for other genres of journalism. Just as in the sentences and paragraphs described earlier, the most important locations in an entire article are the lead and the ending.

The paragraph previously quoted (“It was the year everyone was fascinated....”), throws us off a bit—and hence gets our attention (its main function)--because it is a flashback, to when Gehrig began his career. The dialogue helps recreate the past, makes it more immediate, and then—boom—we are back in the present, when Gehrig broke his long string of starting line-ups. This article concludes by describing Gehrig watching the next game after he requested to be benched, noting that teammate Lefty Gomez was the only player who tried to cheer up the ailing star, as he said, “Hell, Lou, it took 15 years to get you out of the game; sometimes I’m out in 15 minutes.”<sup>25</sup> Next, come the final two sentences of the article:

In the grandstand, viewing all this, was Wally Pipp, now a Grand Rapids (Mich.) businessman. “I know just how he feels,” said Mr. Pipp.<sup>26</sup>

In this conclusion, the author *returns* us to the memorable lead, when Gehrig was asked to replace Pipp at first base. Coming full-circle takes readers back, allowing them to connect the beginning and middle to the end—so that the *whole* makes greater sense—and delivers a greater impact than any of its parts. The irony of Mr. Pipp, past and present, serves as merely an insurance run in building the Gehrig legend.

Leads can function in many ways, but the main way is to activate our curiosity, usually by disorienting us a little. The following three paragraphs—long for most sports leads—goes deep---before we know what or who the article is about. We cannot tell from the title, “He Come to Win.”<sup>27</sup>

Hunched on the eastern shoulder of Manhattan, the grimy crest of Coogan’s Bluff glowers across the Harlem River toward the Bronx. All day, traffic snarls past its littered slopes. Torn newspapers rustle in the limp breeze that swirls along the dirty asphalt of Eighth Avenue; street urchins scuffle in the dust and cadge quarters under the rusty shade of the elevated tracks.

Crowning this dismal landscape, a great, curved, steel-and-stone shrine called the Polo Grounds beckons to the faithful all summer long. By the tens of thousands they respond. They are a special, indestructible breed called Giant fans. Unprotestingly, they submit to the nerve-jangling rites of entrance: the streaming subway ride or the stuffy taxi crawling across Harlem, the foul-tempered

guards who herd them through turnstiles at the gate. Inside, the vast stands sprawl in the sun, the carefully tended ball field is green and trim, ready for the game.

At this inviting sight, the hearts of Giant fans quicken and their eyes gleam. In the big world outside, the pitchers are throwing bean balls, and there seems to be little but trouble. But inside the small, noisy world of the Polo Grounds, all is well. The Giants are winning. They are taking ball games at a better than two-to-one clip, and they have battered the second-place Brooklyn Dodgers into a temporary state of slack-jawed apprehension. This week they were on top of the National League with a handsome six-game lead after Sunday's games. If asked to explain this happy state of affairs in one word, the Giant fan is at no loss. The word is 'Willie.'

Again, like sentences, paragraphs, and whole articles, leading up to the end, saving something for the last act, proves true to this three-paragraph lead. This excerpt also debunks the myth that leads "must consist of one paragraph," as well as the more prevalent myth that "you should only make one point in each paragraph." These three paragraphs, then, function together as a single point—as a "paragraph block," which is common to much of nonfiction prose.

### ***Point of View: The Writer's Hidden Ball Trick***

Much of the time, most readers of baseball articles do not bother themselves with (or are not aware of) the piece's point of view. They seldom ask themselves, "Who is speaking?" or "Where is the speaker located?" or "What biases might this speaker convey?" Although an author's point of view can remain "hidden," it can subtly affect our perceptions of baseball players.

In the introduction quoted above ("Hunched on the eastern shoulder of Manhattan, the grimy crest of Coogan's Bluff glowers across the Harlem River..."), the point of view is omniscient, god-like, as the narrator first views Manhattan from above, clearly seeing *everything* below—from the bluff, to the river, to the blowing discarded newspapers, to the small change given to poor children. The viewer then focuses in on the Polo Grounds, then the fans, as they enter this "shrine" and watch in awe as the Giants work their magic.

The rough effect of a narrator who "sees all," is that of trust: any speaker who knows the big picture, as well as successively smaller details—and how the large connects to the small—must know what he is talking about! This god-like narrator demonstrates his or her power by peering over the actual landscape of Manhattan. However, the narrator in the introduction quoted earlier, about Lou Gehrig ("It was the year everyone was fascinated by a new craze called cross-word puzzles...") flexes his omniscience by going back 14 years in time—and then listening in on a private conversation that the manager has with the young Gehrig. Narrators who conquer time and space can certainly discern who is a legend and who is not!

Far less common than the omniscient point of view is the narrator that views the world from behind the eyes of the ballplayer legend himself:

Exactly 60 ft. 6 in. straight ahead of him, the pitcher looms preternaturally large on his mound of earth. As he crouches close to the ground, his field of vision gives him his own special view of the vast ballpark. The white foul lines stretch to the distant fences; the outfielders seem to be men without legs. Between him and the flycatchers, from the far outfield grass to the brown base paths, the rest of the team twitches nervously in place. In a sense, the game belongs to him. He is the catcher.<sup>28</sup>

This writer assumes the Brooklyn Dodgers' Roy Campanella's point of view for a reason: to demonstrate how and why the catcher's position is "the most demanding in baseball." However, this viewpoint places Campanella's skills into context, in effect comparing him with the other positions, which are minimized (e.g., outfielders are "men without legs" and "flycatchers"). Campanella, the legend, is intensified, as the remaining positions and unnamed team members are downplayed.

This last point of view represents a new form of omniscience. Here is the opening of "Long Live the King," by Joel Stein:<sup>29</sup>

As a climax to the story, it was a little weak. There was no conflict, no point of dramatic tension, no even a gaudy parabola for the money shot. On Monday, after fans had waited 37 years, Mark McGwire hit his record-tying 61st home run of the season, and the next night he showed up for his prime-time network-television special to hit No. 62. The record-breaking shot was McGwire's shortest, lamest homer of the year. Afterward, we looked to the media

to be told what the moral significance was. It was like someone brought in the writers from Home Improvement.

Like the first examples, this point of view is omniscient--but with a peculiar twist. The "world" that this narrator is looking down upon is *not* the world of Manhattan or the Polo Grounds or even the green expanse in front of the catcher at home plate. It is, rather, a *production*—a story being scripted, directed, and filmed—as the narrator states, a "prime-time, network-television special." (The narrator even employs the metaphor of professional wrestling, perhaps the epitome of modern "entertainment.") This narrator controls not the actual world, but the mediated, constructed world of entertainment, of fame, of the *act* of being famous.

This is currently what god-the-narrator aspires to control: a staged show-biz production of reality. This type of awareness or world-view—that we all exist to play dramatic roles for others to watch—is also paralleled in the imagery of major league baseball. For example, today's baseball cards feature not only individual players, but also team mascots, such as "Mr. Met" and "Fred Bird." Some cards portray star players not on the field or standing at the plate, but signing autographs, surrounded by adoring fans and camera-wielding photographers. Nowadays, ballplayer legends are created not just through the demonstration of their skills, but also by their stature as "media personalities." The *act of being famous* is now a necessary ingredient in becoming legendary.

### ***Ball vs. Bat: Contrast and Conflict***

In the world of sports, few contrasts or opposites are as starkly clear as the round ball and long, straight bat. By the same token, using language to achieve contrast is crucial in building baseball legends, because it creates for readers a sense of opposition and conflict, in turn creating tension and the that magical ingredient of drama. Legendary players could not exist without conflict and drama. In the building of baseball legends, language is used in many ways, large and small, to generate contrast and conflict.

Tension or "drama" through contrast can occur in quite subtle ways that nonetheless feed the larger conflicts at work in the world of baseball. Contrary to the (wrong) advice of legions of English teachers, one of the most common elements of contrast is the sentence that begins with "but":

With 215 lbs. packed on a 5 ft. 9 in. frame, he had a barrel belly and a pair of massive legs. **But** on a baseball diamond Campanella was an athlete of grace . . . .<sup>30</sup>

In this same article, such opposition also occurs within sentences ("Durocher screamed havoc (a particular talent), **but** Campy went to St. Paul."), as well as in the middle of sentences ("For the next two years, the Dodgers came close—**but** never quite close enough—to another pennant."). These examples are small, **but** added together, show drama and help build legends.

In "Bonds Breaks McGwire's Record, then breaks his own,"<sup>31</sup> we encounter contrast and tension within the article's first sentence and then again in the second sentence:

Barry Bonds' record-breaking homer had just plunked into a fan's mitt in the right-center field stands when vendors swept through the aisles at Pacific Bell Park hawking souvenir baseballs embossed with "71" in gold.

Less than an hour later, the \$18 balls already were out of date.

Bonds the performer is instantly contrasted with the marketing of Bonds—which is immediately obsolete by his next performance. Irony never hurts drama.

The more opposition that's packed in, the more the legend can grow. In Stein's earlier-noted article about Mark McGwire's breaking Roger Maris's home run record, we find contrasts galore. First, we learn that the Paul Bunyanesque McGwire broke the hallowed record with his "shortest, lamest homer of the year." The second contrast occurs via flashback to spring training of that year, when reporters swarmed into Jupiter, Florida, to grill McGwire as to whether he would break the record in the coming season; McGwire appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* before opening day.<sup>32</sup> The "conflict" occurred when McGwire stayed low-key, mum, and ended interviews. Third, McGwire switched gears completely and began giving interviews, embracing the attention in positive, self-effacing ways. The fourth and final opposition appears when McGwire's constructive response to the pressure is contrasted with Roger Maris, when he broke Ruth's record. The 1961 Yankee suffered wracked nerves and hair loss.

## ***Language as a Map to the Land of Legends***

The main point for readers and consumers to understand about the role of language in the making of baseball legends—or the role of language in all of human affairs—is that the “map” or language is *not* the same thing as the “territory” or reality. S. I. Hayakawa reminds us that “the word is not the thing, the map is not the territory.”<sup>33</sup> In the making of baseball legends (or the making of political movements, or of TV commercials, or nearly anything else), language can inaccurately reflect or “not match up,” with what we know of reality. And it’s often hard to tell when words and facts have been inflated, downplayed, repeated over and over, associated with other elements, or even left out altogether.

Some small anecdotes can strain the average person’s belief in the physical laws of nature: “Once, when he dove out from under his cap (Mays frequently loses his cap) to catch a sinking line drive, he reached back, caught his cap in one hand and the ball in the other.”<sup>34</sup> Another writer stated about Babe Ruth that, “nobody ever hit a ball so hard: he once drove a liner through a pitcher’s legs with such force that it sailed over the centerfielder’s head.”<sup>35</sup>

Similarly and in the same article, McGwire is described as having “willed some lame line-drive single to jump over the wall” for his record-breaking homer—his “less cocky version of Babe Ruth’s called home run.” Manager Tony LaRussa is then quoted: “He wanted to hit it that day, and he did . . . . To me, it was literally superhuman.”<sup>36</sup> It’s a bit hard for me to believe that a line drive could fly under the pitcher’s legs and then over the centerfielder’s head! As for McGwire, I was in the stands that day at Busch Stadium, and his hit was indeed a lame line-drive. I’m also sure he really wanted to hit one out—but “superhuman”? I am not sure these words match the territories in question.

Consider this description of Roger Maris just after he hit home run number 61:

Traded the next season [1958] to the Kansas City Athletics, he doubled his home run output (to 28), batted in 80 runs—but still fell far short of promise. Halfway through the 1959 season, despite an appendectomy, Roger led the American League in batting (.344); then he slumped to a disappointing .273 and was traded during the winter to the Yankees<sup>37</sup>

As an eleven-year-old who intensely followed every move of his pathetic hometown team, the old K.C. Athletics, I well know that Maris was not traded because of his “disappointing” slump. On the contrary, Maris, along with outfielder, Bob Cerv (also “traded” to the Yankees), were widely acknowledged as the brightest stars the A’s ever had since the franchise had moved from Philadelphia. The A’s were basically a farm team for the wealthy Yankees, who snatched them up in exchange for a handful of faded Yankees on the verge of retirement, such as Bill Skowron, Hank Bauer, and Marv Throneberry. In Kansas City, the Maris trade was viewed as the usual type of blatant thievery that our “cow-town” had to endure for many years. In short, my first-hand knowledge of the territory is a far cry from the words just quoted. This verbal map is a far cry from the territory.

In this same 1961 article, “The Making of a Hero,” Ruth is highly praised, while Maris’s “bottle-green eyes smolder malevolently, and thin lips curl in a perpetual pout.” He is further described as, “sullen”; “no match for Babe Ruth”; “a cocky pro”; and as, “slowly consuming cans of beer and smoking cigarettes.”<sup>38</sup> Buried in the middle of the article is some praise of Maris, but *only* his athletic abilities—his “diving catches,” “flat-trajectory throwing arm,” and compact, powerful swing of the bat.

The article, however, continues with unflattering details, noting that Maris once visited a museum (only because his wife was in Chicago with him). Maris stated, “They had a lot of old pictures there.” We learn that Maris never answers fan mail or visits charity hospitals: “The club shouldn’t expect you to go to hospitals. They don’t ask, and I don’t go.” The article ends with Maris disparaging children who seek his autograph: “Kids have gotten too rough. They show no appreciation. They walk on your shoes and half tear your clothes off. I just walk away—I don’t want to get one of their pencils in my eye.” Next come details about the huge money he is raking in with personal appearances, a World Series bonus, and testimonials for products. According to this “map,” Maris is a cheapskate, laconic, surly, ignorant, and mean-spirited.

What this language or map leaves out is what has to be a relatively vast territory—of Maris’s enduring insults from fans who revered Ruth too much to support a man who might break his record; of Commissioner Ford Frick including an asterisk in the record books for Maris’s achievement; of Maris’s wracked nerves which made his hair fall out. In 1961, there were many fans who did not want Maris to break Ruth’s record, and perhaps they were in the majority. There were also many fans who wanted it to happen. This writer used language to build Ruth’s legend, not Maris’s.

These manipulations, stark or subtle, can *reinforce* the social status-quo, as well as *resist* it—and, sooner or later, change course. Consider *Time Magazine’s* descriptions of Pittsburgh Pirate, Roberto Clemente, who was killed in a 1973 plane accident, while overseeing relief efforts for his native Puerto Rico, after a devastating earthquake:

September 26, 1960: "A showboating Puerto Rican."<sup>39</sup>

June 13, 1960: "Perhaps the bounciest of all the Pirates is Outfielder Roberto" ('Arriba') Clemente, 25, a showboating Puerto Rican" ("The Bouncy Pirates").<sup>40</sup>

December 29, 1961: "Pittsburgh's flashy Roberto Clemente..."<sup>41</sup>.

July 21, 1967: "Pittsburgh's Roberto Clemente, eight-year batting average, .328, wrote his name into the All-Star record book (as they say) by whiffing four times in a row."<sup>42</sup>

July 19, 1968: ". . . Pittsburgh's Roberto Clemente, a four-time batting champion, is chopping at .252."<sup>43</sup>

July 27, 1970: "Recently faced with the prospects of suiting up for his 13<sup>th</sup> glamorous event, the Pirates' Roberto Clemente said, 'To hell with the All-Star Game. I can use the rest.' Roberto, who pleaded a 'pain in the neck,' finally agreed to play—but only after National League President, Charles (Chubb) Feeney threatened to crack down on cop-outs."<sup>44</sup>

January 16, 1973: "A genuine hero in Puerto Rico . . . one of its few genuine superstars."<sup>45</sup>

April 16, 1979: ". . . Roberto Clemente . . . a mythic figure . . ." <sup>46</sup>

During these years, it's safe to state that, all things considered, Latino players were a bit less welcomed in the Major Leagues than African American players had become. If at least somewhat true, then these less-than-flattering references to Clemente were perpetuating the status-quo.

In two of the articles referred to earlier, language describing Willie Mays and Roy Campanella also seems to have reinforced the status quo, albeit in a different way. Mays is described as, "cinnamon-tinted"<sup>47</sup>, while Campanella is labeled a "cocoa-colored catcher."<sup>48</sup> Both phrases elicit feelings of warmth and sweetness. These phrases seem a tad euphemistic, even though they appeared in the African American press of the day. It may have been that it was more acceptable to describe them this way, than it may have been to refer to them as, "Negro" or "Black." (The term, "Negro" was used with other players of lesser stature, such as Don Newcomb.)

In mid-fifties America, was such language needed to make these players more acceptable to a largely white audience? Or did the players' amazing skills, abilities, and personalities elicit such language from mesmerized sports writers? Did such discourse reinforce, or resist, social and political inequality? Likely, to varying degrees, all are true.

### **Future Research and Limitations of this Study**

The overall purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the powers of a range of language devices and approaches that can serve to "elevate" to unusual stardom certain baseball players of extraordinary abilities. Any study of symbols, whether they are printed words or images, is subject to limitations. First, there is the issue of internal motivation of the sports writers and speakers quoted here: unless they have been interviewed and explicitly questioned about specific pieces of their writing, there is no way of knowing whether they employed these language devices consciously or unconsciously. Second, this study is limited in terms of the number of artifacts or examples it analyzes. The various baseball archives within the U.S. contain literally millions of pieces of potential data, but I have exercised my own (and hence biased) judgment in selecting which pieces to use, which parts to focus on, and which analytical methods to employ.

Future research should focus on how language is used not just to bolster the reputations of sports heroes, but how it can also be used to denigrate individuals, regardless of whether it is legally or morally justified. Third, we need to research the *interactions* of language and other media, especially television, advertising, and music.

### **Conclusion**

Baseball stars such as Ruth, Gehrig, Mays, McGwire, Bonds, and others haven entered the hallowed halls of American mythology. Their abilities, experiences, and choices in life—their agency—plowed their paths. The vaunted status of these players, perhaps to a lesser extent, was also the creation of the elements of language, large and small, explored in this paper. Across time and space, writers and speakers have skillfully employed techniques such as alliteration; allness orientations, superlatives, similes and metaphors, and syntax, working them in tandem with larger rhetorical devices, such as point of view and conflict, to ensure the depth and breadth of these legends. It

should be noted here that these same language devices have been used just as effectively to “tear down” a legend, as they were to construct him.

Regardless of whether a sports star is rising or falling, what is most important, as I have tried to demonstrate here, is the language itself. The language explored in this paper does not merely report on baseball. It does much more: in many respects, language not only reflects the world, but *creates* it as well. This language keeps the valor and drama of the game alive. It enables us to pass the game down to new generations. Most of us, most of the time, cannot attend all, or even many, actual games. For us, then, language *is* the game. In many ways, the house that Ruth built is also the house that words built.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “Swat.” *Time Magazine*, Oct. 10, 1924. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,769427,00.html>.

<sup>2</sup> “He Come to Play.” *Time Mag.*, July 26, 1954. *Time Mag.*  
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,890000,00.html>.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> “The Making of a Hero.” *Time Mag.*, Sept. 29, 1961.  
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<sup>6</sup> “Big Man from Nice Town.” *Time Mag.*, Aug. 8, 1955.  
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<sup>7</sup> “Long Live the King.” *Time Mag.*, Sept. 21, 1998.  
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<sup>9</sup> “Iron Horse.” May 15, 1939. *Time Mag.*,  
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<sup>10</sup> “Big Man from Nice Town.” *Time Mag.*, Aug. 8, 1955.  
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<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> “Swat.” *Time Magazine*, Oct. 10, 1924. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,769427,00.html>.

<sup>14</sup> “Long Live the King.” *Time Mag.*, Sept. 21, 1998.  
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<sup>15</sup> “He Come to Play.” *Time Mag.*, July 26, 1954. *Time Mag.*,  
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<sup>16</sup> “Big Man from Nice Town.” *Time Mag.*, Aug. 8, 1955.  
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<sup>17</sup> “Swat.” *Time Magazine*, Oct. 10, 1924. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,769427,00.html>.

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- <sup>23</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>24</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>25</sup> “Iron Horse.” May 15, 1939. *Time Mag.*,  
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- <sup>27</sup> “He Come to Play.” *Time Mag.*, July 26, 1954. *Time Mag.*  
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