

## LINGUISTIC ASPECTS IN TENNIS TERMINOLOGY: ORIGINS, DEVELOPMENT, AND ETYMOLOGY

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**Abstract:** This study presents a comprehensive linguistic and etymological analysis of tennis terminology, tracing the historical development, cross linguistic borrowings, and cognitive mechanisms that shaped the sport's lexicon from medieval Jeu de Paume to contemporary global usage. Drawing on a comparative review of primary and secondary sources in Old French, English (British and American varieties), and selected European languages, the research combines etymological reconstruction with contextual corpus checks in historical chronicles, dictionaries, sports manuals and broadcast transcripts. The analysis targets three interconnected domains: the lexical origin and semantic consolidation of the sport's name (tennis) and key scoring items (love, 15, 30, 40, deuce); the derivation and semantic transparency of stroke names and tactical labels (forehand, backhand, slice, topspin, lob, volley, drop shot, contre pied/contrapied); and the cognitive and sociolinguistic processes - metaphorization, semantic extension, calquing and nativization - that enable terminology to travel across languages and media. Results indicate a clear Old French provenance for the game's name and early scoring vocabulary, followed by substantive lexical stabilization under British codification during the nineteenth century and further entrenchment by Anglophone media in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. The study reconstructs plausible borrowing pathways for contested items (e.g. love ← l'œuvre/l'œuf hypotheses; deuce ← à deux) and demonstrates how descriptive English compounds (topspin, drop shot) favor rapid international uptake due to semantic transparency. Cognitive mapping accounts (conceptual metaphor, image schemas) explain why body centered and spatial experiences readily become tactical and evaluative vocabulary in tennis discourse. The paper concludes with implications for sports lexicography, translation practice and media style guides: recommending precision in etymological notes, conservative handling of false cognates, and the creation of standardized multilingual glossaries for commentators and educators.

**Keywords:** tennis, linguistics, etymology, sports terminology, metaphor.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Tennis, from its medieval origins to the present day, is not merely a physical sport but also a carrier of a distinct linguistic code developed over centuries through the interaction of cultures, languages and social practices. Investigating tennis terminology from a linguistic perspective reveals not only the sources of individual words and expressions but also the ways in which language reflects social relations, strategy, metaphorical concepts and translations between systems of thought (Kowalikowa, 2009; Bobyreva, 2023). The aim of this article is to systematize the origin and evolution of key terms, to examine linguistic influences and processes of borrowing and adaptation, and to consider specific strokes and situations from the viewpoint of their etymology and semantics.

### 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is based on a comparative review of primary and secondary sources in Old French, English (British and American varieties) and selected European languages, as well as on corpus-informed contextual checks in historical chronicles, dictionaries, sports manuals and broadcast transcripts. The methodological approach combined etymological reconstruction using major etymological dictionaries and historical accounts (e.g., OED, Online Etymology Dictionary, specialist histories of the game), corpus checks and contextual verification across historical chronicles, printed manuals, modern training literature and media transcripts in order to observe usage, stabilization and semantic shifts across time and registers, and analytical lenses drawn from cognitive linguistics (conceptual metaphor theory, image schemas) and sociolinguistics (borrowing, calquing, nativization) to explain how physical and spatial experiences map onto tactical and evaluative vocabulary in tennis discourse. Where appropriate, the

research referenced institutional histories and rule codifications (e.g., International Tennis Federation materials), specialist coaching literature and lexicographic sources to triangulate etymological claims and usage patterns.

### 3. RESULTS

Etymology of the word “tennis”

The word “tennis” can be traced to Old French *\*tenez\** (the imperative form of *tenir* — “to hold”, “take”) which functioned as an on-court call meaning “take this” or “play” used by the server to signal the start of a point (Gillmeister, 1997; Online Etymology Dictionary; Tennis.com, 2012). The hypothesis supported by major lexicographic authorities is that this verbal formula became associated with the game as a whole. Alternative, less-supported hypotheses (e.g., Phoenician-like resonances or links to the Egyptian toponym Tinnis) lack comparable linguistic and documentary backing.

Scoring system: love, 15, 30, 40, deuce, and sets

The scoring system of tennis is notably idiosyncratic and much debated. One influential account links the numbers 15, 30 and 40 to an early practice of using a clock face to visualize points in *Jeu de Paume* — advancing by 15, 30, 45 and finally to 60 to mark the end of the game. Over time 45 is reported to have been reduced to 40 in spoken practice, creating the familiar 15–30–40 sequence (Wilson, 2014; Time Magazine, 2018; Prowse, 2024).

The term “love” for zero is etymologically controversial but widely discussed. The most common account associates it with the French *\*l'œuf\** (egg), symbolizing zero by shape; through phonetic transformation and folk etymology this reportedly became English “love” (Merriam-Webster, 2019; Wikipedia, 2024). A less-supported alternative links the term to Dutch expressions (e.g., *\*lof doen\**), but the *\*l'œuf\** hypothesis retains greater acceptance in the literature (The New Yorker, 1962; Wikipedia, 2024). The term “deuce” is commonly traced to French *\*à deux\**, meaning “(to) two” (i.e., two successive points needed), used to denote equalizing play that requires a two-point margin (Prowse, 2024).

The terms “game” and “set” derive from English lexical items with their own semantic histories but acquired specific technical meanings within tennis rules formalized in nineteenth-century England (International Tennis Federation, 2022; Wilson, 2014).

Linguistic influences and mechanisms shaping tennis vocabulary

Tennis terminology reflects prolonged contact primarily between French origins (*Jeu de Paume*) and later English codification and dissemination. France provided early lexical material (Gillmeister, 1997; ITF, 2022), while nineteenth-century British standardization anchored many terms and rules (Wilson, 2014). In modern times, English functions as a principal donor of descriptive compounds (e.g., topspin, drop shot) which spread internationally by virtue of semantic transparency, media distribution and institutional propagation.

Key linguistic mechanisms observed include borrowing, calquing, semantic extension and metaphorization. The adoption of English technical compounds into other languages often follows minimal phonological adaptation or direct loanword transfer; alternately, local languages sometimes create equivalent terms (nativization) or hybrid forms under media and pedagogical pressure (Klégr & Bozděchová, 2019; Bobyreva, 2023).

Etymology and semantics of stroke names and match situations

*Contre-pied* (*contre-pied* / *contrappied* / “wrong-footing”): Borrowed from French *\*contre-pied\** meaning “against the foot” or “wrong foot,” it denotes tactics that place an opponent on the unexpected side, metaphorically extending from bodily position to strategy (Collins Dictionary; Wiktionary).

*Drop shot* / *drop volley*: From English *\*drop\** (to let fall) + *\*shot/volley\**, these terms are semantically transparent composites describing strokes that make the ball fall quickly close to the net. Their compositional clarity aids rapid borrowing.

*Slice* and *topspin*: *\*Slice\** (literally “a cutting” or “slice”) metaphorically describes the slicing action of the racket creating backspin. *\*Topspin\** (top + spin) denotes forward topspin and is an English descriptive compound that entered many languages with minimal adaptation, owing to its transparency and descriptive power (Roertert & Kovacs, 2011; USTA, 2017).

*Lob*: From English *\*to lob\** (to throw lightly/high), indicating a high-arching shot sent over an opponent's head to counter their aggressive positioning—a semantic shift from simple action to strategic maneuver (Simpson & Weiner, 1989).

*Smash*: From English *\*smash\** (to break/crush), used for a decisive overhead shot — an example of onomatopoeic and forceful semantic association appropriate to contemporary sport language (OED, 2024; Wilson, 2014).

*Forehand* / *Backhand*: Descriptive English compounds denoting the stroke played with the fore/front of the body or the back/behind the body; their transparency makes them durable and widely borrowed (Bobyreva, 2023).

Volley / Stop volley: \*Volley\* derives from French \*volée\* (flight), used via English to denote strikes before the ball bounces. \*Stop volley\* combines \*stop\* and \*volley\* to denote a short, soft volley intended to stop the ball near the net, again a compositional, descriptive name (USTA, 2017; Wilson, 2014).

#### 4. DISCUSSIONS

Tennis vocabulary is rich in metaphorical and conceptual structures. Terms such as \*break\* (as in winning the opponent's service game) employ spatial/warfare metaphors to denote seizing an opponent's ordered advantage; \*hold\* frames the retention of one's service game as preserving status quo. \*Contre-pied\* fuses physical posture and cognitive surprise. These patterns align with cognitive-linguistic theory which posits that sport language reflects networks of bodily, spatial and social experience (Kowalikowa, 2009; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

The dominance of English in contemporary sports lexicons results from historical institutionalization (British rule-setting), pedagogical texts, and global media distribution. However, local languages display active strategies of nativization or coining equivalents, resulting in hybrid or competitive systems where English forms coexist with localized renditions (Abdullayev et al., 2020; Bobyreva, 2023). The processes of borrowing are often driven by media, coaching literature, and institutional standards, producing rapid diffusion of semantically transparent compounds and slower acceptance for opaque or culturally-specific terms.

From a lexicographic and translation perspective, particular caution is required with false cognates and folk etymologies (e.g., popular but uncertain accounts of \*love\*). Corpus-based verification helps avoid over-reliance on attractive but unsubstantiated etymologies. Furthermore, the study highlights the pedagogical advantage of transparent compounds in coaching and broadcasting—they allow faster comprehension across linguistic communities.

#### 5. CONCLUSIONS

The linguistic analysis of tennis terminology reveals a complex web of historical, etymological, cognitive and sociocultural processes. The term “tennis” and the scoring system bear traces of French roots, while contemporary stroke names predominantly result from transparent compositional mechanisms and metaphorical appropriation. Borrowing and adaptation display a dual dynamic: the global prominence of English as a donor language and the agency of local linguistic systems in integrating and shaping those loans. As a component of sport language, tennis vocabulary functions descriptively but also normatively, organizing interaction, expectations and identities in competitive and media contexts.

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