

The genre set for synchronized swimmers:
a discourse analysis at Michigan

“Imagine running the 400 metres

Now imagine doing it in the water.

Now do it half upside down.

Now keep your feet arched

And your toes pointed all the time.

Now smile.”

(FINA Nationals brochure)

In the athletic world, it is impossible to actively watch a sport let alone participate in it unless you are able to understand the discourse of that specific sport. Each sport has its own unique discourse and terminology, which varies in many aspects depending on the details of the sport. Within each sport, there are also different genres of discourse that occur. Some genres are apparent in most if not all sports, such as a document stating the rules and guidelines, coaching, cheering, and pep-talks, although the way in which they occur vary depending on the individual sport. Other genres are specific to few sports if not belonging solely to one. Synchronized swimming is an interesting and distinct sport because it is quite unlike any other. Because of this, the discourse on a synchronized swimming team is similarly distinct and special to this sport, along with having genres of discourse that no other sport has. In this paper, I will analyze the different genres of synchronized swimming, focusing on the specific discourse community of the University of Michigan synchro swimming team.

The discourse on the University of Michigan synchronized swimming team is quite different than discourse of other collegiate synchro teams. The variability of discourse on individual teams is expected, and reasons for it may include differing personalities, coaching styles, and swimming abilities of the athletes. The U of M team is special in that it has changed drastically over the course of a few years and is still continuing to change. By looking at the

team through a discourse analysis perspective, we can gain insight as to the team dynamics, specific coaching styles and what can be done to improve communication and strengthen the team overall.

Synchronized swimming began in the United States in the 1920's when a competitive swimmer from the University of Wisconsin tried "stunt swimming." Soon after she formed the first "synchronized swim team" in the United States. In 1954, this sport was recognized by the International Aquatic Association (FINA), which is the governing body for all water sports in the world. In 1979, United States Synchronized Swimming (USSS) was established as the governing body for synchro in the United States. Other important dates include 1984, when the solo and duet events were first included in the Los Angeles Olympics, and 1996, when the team event debuted in the Atlanta Olympic games.

Synchronized swimming at Michigan began in the 1960's when a club team was formed, called the Michi-fish. In 1972 it became one of the first varsity sports at U of M; but then in 1981 when Michigan athletics came under NCAA jurisdiction, the varsity team had to be discontinued because it was not sanctioned by NCAA rules. At that point it became a club team once again, but ever since it has been working hard to re-claim varsity status. In the late 1990s, the team was down to five people and in danger of being cut from the Michigan athletic program all together; but today in 2005 there are twenty-seven girls on the team, which is the largest collegiate team in the US. We have both girls who have had no experience before college, and girls who have swum synchro for years and years before entering the University program. As the terminology of synchronized swimming is quite difficult to pick up, it is not only the coaches but also the experienced swimmers who help the novices successfully understand and use the discourse. At the beginning of the season, however, there is a lot of work done to simply bring

the novices up to speed on the terminology and the different spoken and written genres of this sport.

Recruitment meetings are the first spoken genre of synchro that any swimmer at Michigan encounters. They occur at the beginning of the season and are run by the coaches and captains for the purpose of getting anyone who is interested in synchro to join the team. The prospective swimmers are introduced to the general ideas of the sport, how the team at Michigan is run, the level of commitment necessary to be on the team, how much money it will cost, and other details of the coming synchro season. There are generally about fifteen to twenty girls at the meetings, but few who come to the meetings have any prior knowledge of synchro, so the discourse is very casual and not too synchro-specific. If any questions are asked, they usually relate to details about the team in general, not about the sport itself.

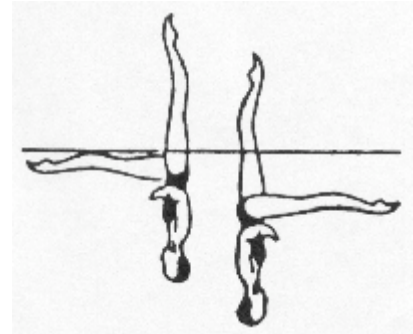
A very different type of recruitment meeting is held, however, with girls who have swum synchro with a club team before entering college. These meetings usually include just the coach, a current swimmer, and the prospective recruit and her family. Since she is coming out to Michigan specifically to learn about our team, it is much more in depth and more laden with synchro terminology because she is already familiar with it. Her questions are more specific to synchro and how she can accomplish her goals at Michigan, so the overall tone is also more formal because we want experienced girls to join our team and want to show them that we are serious.

Once the season has started and we start our practices, the next type of discourse we encounter are the written FINA descriptions of body positions, body movements and figures. These descriptions are first used in the season to aid the coaches in teaching us the different skills needed for synchro, but we also use them throughout the season for reference in case we

forget what our body should be doing in a specific move. Following are examples of FINA descriptions (See Appendix A for full list):

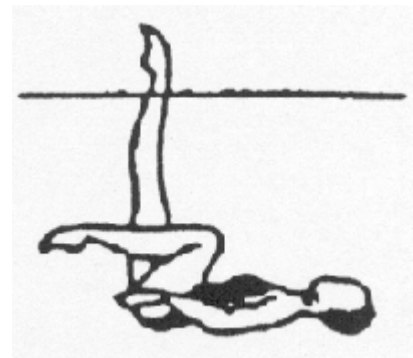
CRANE POSITION

Body extended in **Vertical Position**, with one leg extended forward at a 90° angle to the body.



SUBMERGED FLAMINGO POSITION

Trunk, head and shin of the bent leg parallel to the surface. 90° angle between the trunk and extended leg. Water level between knee and ankle of the extended leg.



The tone of these descriptions is very formal and they use precise word choice because these materials are defining what the perfect position, movement and figure would look like. They are fairly difficult to understand at first because the wording is so dense and lack auxiliary verbs to make the sentences flow better, but they tell you succinctly and without flourishes how the skill should be executed so there can be no misunderstanding. These materials are helpful because they have pictures alongside each description to show what the skill looks like. For

novices, these pictures are especially helpful. Since the descriptions can be difficult to understand, the picture is a good visual tool to show what the element looks like in the water.

It is interesting to note that swimmers on the team at U of M are never given a glossary sheet or even explicitly told what terms to remember. This means that the swimmers have to often ask experienced swimmers or the coaches what certain terms mean and then just pick them up from use and hearing other people use them. Some common words used in synchro that would not be understood by people outside this discourse community include:

Boost: Similar to a pop, but this is a bigger movement in which the swimmer rises rapidly out of the water as high as possible above the waterline and then sinks immediately

Cadence:

A sequence of identical movements performed by all team members, individually and in rapid succession

Counts: The term used by swimmers to describe what movements go at what times during a routine

Crash: A dramatic way to get out of a hybrid in which the swimmer brings her legs down swiftly to cause a splash on the surface of the water. This term is generally preceded by a synchro move which describes how the crash will be done, for example, a “split crash”

Deckwork:

Movements performed on the deck of the pool, as part of a routine, before the athletes enter the water.

Eggbeater: The rapid rotary action of the legs that synchronized swimmers use to keep their bodies high above the water line

Figure: A series of distinct body movements completed by a swimmer that flow together seamlessly. Judging is based on control, precision, and accuracy as compared to the figure description; also one of two distinct parts of a synchro competition (with the other being the routine competition)

Hybrid: The term used to describe the sequence of leg movements done above the water while the swimmer is inverted

Pattern: A term used when talking about a routine to describe the overall shape made by the swimmers' location in the water relative to each other

Pattern Change: Transitioning from one pattern to another, sometimes above water, sometimes underwater

Pop: The movement in which a swimmer is beneath the water and then eggbeaters up out of the water to normal eggbeater height and remains above water

Scul:

Continuous movement of the hands in the water to balance and support the body

Tuck: A back-somersault done after the swimmer has sunk below the surface of the water (usually after a hybrid) to orient her body upright again

These are just some of the more frequently used terms in synchronized swimming, but more terms appear throughout the season. Most terms are general to the sport of synchro, but some are also created specifically to describe moves in a particular routine.

The next genre of discourse is a spoken genre referred to as land-drilling or decking. These terms are an example of discourse specific to synchronized swimming, as this genre is distinct to this sport. Land-drilling refers to the way swimmers learn routines on land before putting them in the water, and also practice routines on land once they have been learned. In land-drilling, each skill has an arm movement that correlates to the movement in the water. Some are fairly straightforward, but others are a bit confusing, especially at first. For example, for a ballet leg, one arm is extended straight out in front of you perpendicular to the floor (the extended leg) and the other arm is extended straight up towards the ceiling (the perpendicular leg), which seems to make sense. Land-drilling inverted moves, however, gets a bit more confusing. For example, in a crane, one arm is extended vertical up towards the ceiling (the vertical leg), and one arm is bent so that the elbow is facing forward and the fingertips are pointed behind you (the leg parallel to the surface of the water). Eventually, swimmers get good enough at land-drilling that when they do the movements on land, they can visualize the movements in the water, so the routine gets translated to the water easily.

In the following section of transcription, recorded on March 30, 2005, the coach, Steph, is teaching the swimmers the finale routine for our annual water show (see Appendix B for full transcription):

Steph: Alright guys, I wanna play the music. We're gonna count it. And, during the first two or three counts of eight all we're going to be doing now is marching out.

Andrea: Marching?

Steph: Marching.

Erika: Can we all stick little things in our stomachs and pretend we're pregnant?

Steph: Yeah how bout no.

Andrea: What'd you ask Erika?

Erika: She just...

Steph: Alright ready? Lets count the beginning.

Erika: She was pregnant for the show her senior year... (Music starts)

Steph: FIVE SIX SEVEN EIGHT

(Few people): ONE TWO THREE FOUR FIVE SIX SEVEN EIGHT, THREE TWO THREE FOUR FIVE SIX SEVEN EIGHT

Steph: FOUR, this is when you guys are gonna bend over FIVE... SIX the dive happens. SEVEN, EIGHT is when the second line dives, and NINE is when the third line dives. Then you guys are popping at this point, we're gonna go through all of this again

Erika: Are we gonna be in the "M" this year?

Steph: You guys pop on that count... Gotta think of an arm thing here

Erika: This is longer than I remember.

Mar: ...ONE TWO THREE FOUR FIVE SIX...

Steph: Ok, A and B team will have sunk by now, k, ("Hail...") A-team lift (*second "Hail"*) B-team lift

Erika: We're still underwater

(*short pause*)

Steph: Um, no, you will have popped by then. No you popped on the fourth count

Marianna: look it works!

Erika: hahahaha

Steph: Oh jeez. Ok, this is, this is when the non A and B team people are gonna be forming the block "M" (inaud)

Mar: Holla, holla (music ends)

Steph: Alright, so whats gonna happen, let me back up. I lied and I am gonna actually have to have competition people in the second line and we'll have performance people in the third line and we might have to have a fourth. Lets have, um, Amy and Sarah here, and then Kelly and Marianna over here just so that we have A-team on one side and B-team on the other. I just remembered about the lift thing

Andrea: We do the same thing in the second line?

Erika: Marianna, you have to (inaud)...

Steph: And then, lets have eight A-team people on this half...

Marianna: I'm working on it Erika, god (inaud)

Steph: ...yeap, exactly... Alright, and you guys want, its gonna be, um, well you could pretty much for the first lift you guys can decide what you wanna do, I'd love to see the Andrea lift for the first one, and then the throw for your first one...

Mar: their's is a cool throw

Steph: ...and then the second one is just gonna be a stack, just a high stack and this at the end with a punch up

Andrea: How about a throw

Steph: What?

Marianna: Maybe we can throw her

Steph: Nothing new, nothing new.

Erika: You're gonna get a throw in Spice Girls

Mar: I wanna throw 'er!

Many things are apparent after analyzing this transcription. The first thing to notice is the discourse with regards to the music. When the music is playing and Steph is making comments, she never says anything on the ONE of any count of eight. The first count of every count of eight, in this routine, is when major things happen, so she wants to make sure first and foremost that she is highlighting important parts of the music for the swimmers. Then in between those major counts, she makes any comments she feels are necessary. In essence, long strings of dialogue are broken up by numbers being yelled out. In land-drilling other routines when more is going on in every count of eight, the coaches have even less time to make comments, and often wait till the end to give all comments at once so as not to interrupt the swimmers' focus.

Another thing to notice from the transcription is coaching style on this specific team. One of the difficulties in teaching a routine is that often, different swimmers or groups of swimmers need to learn different parts, so when that happens, everyone not involved in that part has to sit around and wait for their part to be taught. Instead of waiting quietly, most people launch into separate conversations, which makes it difficult for the coach to keep the girls focused. In addition, when Steph is teaching us the routine and making comments, swimmers are often having their own conversations or making comments not directly related to the task at hand, so she either brings them back with phrases like, "Alright, guys..." or tries to ignore the comments altogether and just keeps teaching or making her comments. Overall, the coach tries

to be assertive, but the swimmers seem to be fairly unreceptive to it. They listen to the extent that they need to understand but are also interested in socializing and having fun with their fellow teammates, as this is not able to be done in the water. This kind of casual atmosphere would probably not be found on a varsity team where sessions similar to this one might be more focused and the girls would be more attentive to their coach.

The next genre of discourse is coaching in the water. Once everyone in a routine has learned it on land, it's time to put the routine in the water and practice swimming through it. For synchronized swimming, there are underwater speakers for the swimmers to be able to hear their music and comments from the coach when they're underwater, which is sometimes easier than listening above the water because of the lack of ambient noise. Despite this helpful technology, it is still difficult to always hear the music and the coach clearly, so the discourse of coaching changes from the land to the water.

This is a transcription of discourse spoken on March 30, 2005 at practice. Steph is at one end of the pool and everyone else is either on the opposite end of the pool or in the water, making communication fairly difficult (See Appendix C for full transcription):

Steph: Yeah we can work on that part of it in a second. Guys, will it be a problem if we move up the dive and the jump for people. The front dive is happening a lot faster than anticipated so if we do the front dive on six...

Andrea: Yeah that's better

Steph: ...and then, the second dive on...

Dubay: eight

Steph: ...eight I think we can do it, and then the third dive on nine, or the third line step in on nine, ok, can we do that? Ok, this time what we're gonna do, and then everyone still, I, everyone can pop on, I think everyone will be able to pop on like twelve-ish, or thirteen

Erika: Last time...

Steph: ...we'll see how it goes.

Erika: Twelve is good.

Steph: Twelve. Lets try popping on twelve. B-team you guys have gotta squish a little bit more this way because C and D team, just try a bit more. Guys we're gonna go straight through this time.

Mar: Steph we can't move any more cuz we'll hit the diving boards

Steph: Ok. This is the last time we're gonna try it through to the, through the beginning part.

(short pause)

Steph: K, first line dives on six, second line dives on eight, third line steps in on nine.

Mar: Whens our lift, is it after?

Steph: Its on the “Hail” part. Hail...

Mar: what count?

Steph: ...Its um, eighteen I think? But its after those “daaah, dah dah dah dah dah... Hail!” k, right there.

(pause)

Steph: K, lets try it.

(pause)

(Music starts –twelve counts of eight with no talking)

Steph: Good, everyone pop, good. C and D get really tight. C and D get really tight. K, A and B under.

(start of “Hail!”)

Steph: K, you guys keep moving forward. Stay in your lines, watch your lines. A and B what are you guys doing, you’re supposed to be in pattern. Ok.

(Music ends)

Steph: Alright that worked fairly well. FAIRLY well.

(inaudible swimmers talking in the water)

Steph: Yeah, C and D team you’re gonna be eggbeatering forward that whole time, ok?

(pause)

Steph: Alright A and B team do you guys have any questions?

Erika: No we got it.

Steph: You got it? Ok

Erika: Wait, yeah, what count do we pop after the lift?

Steph: Um, I would, I would like to see A and B team pop on “Leaders and Best”

Erika: So, “leaders and...”

Steph: Yeah

Erika: Aright

Steph: Ok? A and B team are gonna pop on leaders and best after the lift, ok?

The coaching style in the water differs from the coaching style on land in many ways.

When swimming a routine, the swimmers have much more to think about in the water than on land, so because of this, the coach keeps her comments to a minimum. When she does make comments however, they are short, to the point, maybe perceived a bit harsher, and spoken in synchro shorthand. Comments before, during and after a swim-through are also often repeated for clarification between coach and swimmer, or the coach repeats her own comments to be sure the swimmers understand because things are hard to hear in the water. The type of discourse that occurs when swimmers are in the water is much faster paced and spoken in synchro shorthand more than on land because there is more going on so less time to make comments. Because of

this, the discourse is much more synchro specific, so basically only people in the synchro discourse community will successfully be able to understand.

Another coaching style point is that for the most part, Steph tends to wait till the very end of a routine to make most comments, instead of giving them during the routine. She sometimes makes short comments if they are really important and simple, but any complex ones are left for the end. On other varsity teams, coaches make comments throughout, not worrying about whether they are talking over important counts of the routine. A possible explanation could be that since swimmers on varsity teams are more experienced, they can process comments from the coach during a routine while they are swimming since they have done it for so long and are used to it. Since the Michigan team is club, there are few swimmers with past synchro experience and many novices on the team, so our coaches may think that giving us comments during the routines would be too much for the swimmers.

During the season, after we perform a routine at a meet, the coaches watch the video either by themselves or with the swimmers and make comments. Usually the coaches write down the comments and give them to us to work on the next time we practice in the water. These written comments from the coach are the next type of genre in the synchro world.

The following is an e-mail that one of my coaches sent to my trio on Thursday February 10, 2005 after a meet at Ohio State on February 5:

Hi guys -

Steph and I watched the video of your swim from OSU and we had a few comments about things that need to be worked on:

- ** between the first two pops at the very beginning, you need to move "out" so that you aren't coming up in the same hole. Erika and Katie need to "pull" more while the arms are connected to assist with this
- ** fix the pattern problem before the pull-through (make sure we look at this on Monday at practice)
- ** messy pattern change at very end of "still rock & roll" and beginning of next song

- ** Jessi needs to rise higher in the "Ack Ack" bent knee (between the 2 spins)
- ** Need to move underwater before the OSU boost
- ** Need to do a REAL tuck out of the split crash
- ** Bad angle on crash down after open tabletop turn hybrid, and maybe go to pike instead of bent knee on crash down?

Let's make sure we address these on Monday! Thanks!

Becky

This type of discourse is arguably the hardest to understand. Not only do you need knowledge of synchronized swimming, but you also need knowledge of the specific routine to fully understand this piece of discourse. There is a lot of shorthand, not only with the names of synchro skills but in conveying what part of the routine the comment is talking about. In addition, the comments are not elaborate or wordy; just enough is said so that everyone knows what she is talking about. Since everyone knows the routine really well by the time the girls are swimming it in competitions, there does not need to be much explanation of the context of what needs to be fixed or modified.

Before big competitions, the coordinators of the event send out a meet announcement, which is the next genre of synchro. The announcement has elements that can be understood by everyone, such as directions, entry fees, hotel accommodations, etc. The interesting thing about synchro meet announcements, however, is that in the midst of all the general discourse that appears, sections of highly specified synchro discourse get thrown in. For example, in the technical events category, terms like “rocket split,” “dalecarlia,” and “heron twirl” are included, which people outside the synchro discourse community would have difficulty understanding. Other synchro-specific sections include pool specs, which are helpful for the swimmers to know for when they swim their routines; venue rules, which includes information about a “designated gelling area” at the pool; and sound system, which includes information about the specific

underwater sound system, and is important because music is a vital component to the competition. (See Appendix D for copy of actual meet announcement)

Another important genre of discourse in the synchro world is the pep-talk. While pep-talks are a genre of discourse found not only in many sports but also in many other life situations, there are aspects of synchro pep-talks that are specific to this sport. One interesting thing about synchro pep-talks is that they occur amidst a sea of chaos. There is the music of other routines blaring in the background, along with the crowd's cheering, and other teams preparing to swim as well. In addition, swimmers might be rushing to finish applying their make-up, putting in their headpieces, changing suits, or getting their nose-clips on. The pep-talk is a time to gather everyone on the team and focus their energies on their upcoming swim.

The following transcription was recorded at the Collegiate Synchronized Swimming Nationals on March 25, 2005. This is a discussion between Steph and the A-team at U of M before their semi-final swim. (See Appendix E for full transcription; See Appendix F for transcription of B-team pep-talk)

Amy: This is the last time we have to swim while we're here

Rochelle: this is it guys

Amy: And nobody say I'm less, ok... Just let me be happy with that right now.

Steph: Absolutely

Amy: Let me be happy with that, this is the last time I have to swim.

SvanWes: Yeap.

Steph: hahaha

SvanWes: Last time

Amy: Let me just say that and I'll, instant calm

Steph: There you go

Rochelle: She's not even making excuses for her comments.

Steph: You can, you can expend absolute last ounce of everything you have in this routine.

Amy: Good

Katie: Because Amy, in the last lift is going all the (inaud)...

Steph: haha

Katie: ...flying.

Amy: And everyone is, I'm just gonna keep straight and if I hit ya I hit ya, break my neck, just bring me up ok?

SvanWes: Go for it, yeah
Steph: yeah then like, haha, someone will just be like choke hold like this and then we'll, just do the arms together like this, haha
Katie (talking over Steph): nuh uh, I'll do the right ones and be like Kate, why are your arms straight
Ro: see star!
Steph: Yeah, exactly haha
SvanWes: and 1...
Katie: and then after 1, 2, 3, 4...
Ro: Yeah
Katie: I know, I know its just (inaud)
Steph: haha
Ro (interrupting): all right guys, team huddle
Katie: even though I don't...
Steph: Alright
Amy (to Katie) You don't have to worry.
Steph: Nope
(pause)
SvanWes: aaaaah
Steph: You've never been more ready. Honestly.
SvanWes: honestly
Steph: this is amazing for any of your routines for this whole meet you are not more ready than you are for this
Katie: right
Steph: And you guys have made me so proud of how, how you've bonded together in the last few weeks that nothing you can do will change that so all you have to do is go out there, and just, play those judges. *(sounds of hugs and kisses)*
SvanWes: just, play the audience and play the judges
Ro: we're having fun and we're just gonna smile and (inaud)...
Amy (interrupting): We don't face the audience that much do we, oh yeah we do, we do...
Ro: ...that's our goal.
Amy: That was the snap, and this is the back
Steph: Yeah we wrote it for this pool, cuz you actually face the audience more than facing the other way *(big cheering)*
Steph: alright, I'm gonna leave you guys
(pause, more hugs)
Steph: (inaud, to random swimmers)
Rochelle (to a senior): Your last routine!
Steph: alright, good luck.

The discourse during a pep-talk is highly varied, especially in this transcription. A lot of it is just general pep-talk discourse. The coach telling the girls how proud she is, the "give it all you got" talk, and so on. There are other times, however, when the girls are talking in shorthand about specific moves in their routine where the discourse is highly synchro-specific. They are able to finish each others' sentences or anticipate what another girl is going to say regarding their

own routine, while an outside listener would have no idea what is going on. This is because by the time the Nationals competition comes around in the synchro season, the swimmers know their routines and the girls in their routines so well that little has to be said for another swimmer to understand.

In this transcription, we can see once again how the coaching style on the University of Michigan synchro team might be a bit different from varsity teams. At Nationals, Michigan does not generally make it to finals, so their semi-final swim is their only swim. They are not concerned with getting a high enough score to move on; each routine just wants to swim the best that they have all season, so the coaching style reflects this. Steph, the coach, is not the one leading the pep-talk. In fact, she is not a very vocal member in the discourse at all. For the most part, she lets her swimmers be each others' moralers, and say whatever they want to get themselves excited for the routine and let their nervous energy out. Overall, the mood is generally cheerful and casual. On a varsity team, each swim through would be a much bigger deal because they know that they have a chance at not only making it to finals but also doing well in finals and finishing high in the rankings. Thus, during the pep-talks, the coach would probably play a much more prominent role in leading them and getting the girls fired up to do well, while keeping the tone focused and more serious.

The final genre of discourse worth noting is cheering for a routine. In the world of synchronized swimming, cheering is very important to the girls swimming. During a routine the swimmers are working very hard, and if they have encouragement, it makes the swim through much easier to finish. The interesting thing is, however, that cheering can only happen when the swimmers are above the water or else they will not be able to hear it. In a routine, since the girls are underwater about half the time, cheering can only occur about half the time. But when the

time comes for people to cheer, they do it more enthusiastically than ever because they are cheering for everything that has happened in the routine since the girls last went under water. It is an exciting type of cheering specific to this sport.

Synchronized swimming is a unique sport for many reasons. First off, synchro has elements and skills that are not found in any other sport. Because of this, the names for all these moves are distinct to synchro alone. Another reason why synchro is unique is that it happens across two mediums. Much of the discourse happens on land, but a lot of it also happens in the water, which requires making changes to discourse so that it works both on deck and in the pool. With such a unique sport comes a special and distinct discourse community that works together to achieve greatness in the water. From recruitment meetings to pep-talks, a season of synchronized swimming is full of different genres of discourse. Through analysis of the different genres on the Michigan synchronized swimming team, we can see that there are certain features of the coaches' discourse that is quite distinct to this collegiate team. As the club continues to strive for varsity status, it is changing many aspects of the team to achieve this goal. For example, the team is trying to recruit more girls with prior synchro experience, make up more challenging routines for the swimmers, and take over much of the administrative work that usually falls under the responsibility of the captains on a club team. While these are good steps to make, the coaches might want to consider making changes to the style in which they coach the girls on the team as well. For example, they could be more assertive in land-drilling sessions, more prominent in pep-talks, and during swim-throughs give comments throughout the routine instead of waiting till the end. Certainly, the swimmers must be aware of and responsive to these changes, but if these types of modifications to the discourse were made, then the team could be one step close to becoming a varsity team at Michigan once again.