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MUSIC AND DISCOURSE
Theoretical and Empirical Insights

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1. Introduction

Language and music, two distinctly human endeavours, share numerous parallels: both depend on sound and/or signs, exhibit hierarchical organisation and culturally-informed practices, and possess the capacity to convey both communicative and social significance. This shared ground offers a rich terrain for studies bridging them together. An increasing interest in musical discourse has been evident in language research for some time and has taken various forms, demonstrating a large potential for linguistic investigation in this field. Particularly, linguists have made significant contributions, operating in two main dimensions: examining song lyrics (e.g. Werner 2012; Bértoli 2018; Larroque 2023) and describing meaning-making practices related to or surrounding music (e.g. Machin 2010; Way, McKerrell 2017). From a theoretical perspective, few attempts have been made so far to conceptualise music itself as a form of (critical) discourse, with the exception of van Leeuwen (1998, 1999, 2012), Bradby (2003) and Aleshinskaya (2013).

To date, a comprehensive linguistic scrutiny of the rich communicative resources and dynamics at work within the sphere of music-related language and discourse remains relatively underexplored. This perceived gap in relevant research is particularly notable in respect of synchronic and diachronic analysis of texts and genres, multimodal, multilingual and contrastive studies, language use in music-related professional settings, and the situated meanings and values of music production, consumption and performance. This special issue seeks to contribute to addressing this gap by drawing on a variety of theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches, in line with a broad understanding of music as object of study—one that encompasses its production, distribution and reception. From a variety of perspectives, including Applied Linguistics, Corpus Linguistics, Discourse Analysis, Genre Analysis, Multimodality, Phonetics and Phonology, and Translation Studies, our contributors offer rigorous linguistic analysis of various music-related texts and genres, while also addressing the methodological challenges of using

linguistic approaches to the study of musical language and discourse more broadly.

2. Organisation of the volume

This special issue brings together a diverse range of contributions exploring the intersections between music, language, discourse, social engagement, and education. The papers are organised into thematic sections that reflect the multifaceted nature of (popular) musical language and discourse—ranging from genre-specific textual analyses to sociolinguistic and corpus-based approaches, from the role of music in political resistance and accessibility to multimodal representations and educational applications. Together, these studies offer a comprehensive view of how (popular) music can function as a powerful lens through which to investigate broader cultural, linguistic, and ideological processes.

The volume opens with a contribution by **Michele Sala**, entitled "Lines of Longitude and Latitude. Defining Text Genres in Popular Music Discourse", which investigates the discourse of popular music (PMD) across three key genres: musicology, musicography, and musical biography. By underscoring PMD's complexity and its role in shaping social perceptions of popular music, the investigation traces the emergence of PMD following the cultural rise of rock'n'roll, and offers a qualitative analysis of each genre's rhetorical and semiotic strategies. While musicology adopts an expert-driven, analytical stance, and musicography emphasises collective cultural production, musical biography foregrounds personal creativity and emotion.

Building on this genre-based perspective, the article of **Gilberto Giannacchi,** "America's Greatest Rock Critic: A Corpus Stylistics Investigation on Lester Bangs's Texts", sheds light on stylistic innovation in music journalism. Specifically, the study examines Lester Bangs's distinctive style in rock journalism through a corpus stylistics approach, with particular emphasis on how he presents speech and thought using Semino and Short's (2004) model. The findings show how Bangs blends journalistic and literary registers, influenced by Beat prose, offering valuable insights into the stylistics of music criticism as a hybrid, multidisciplinary practice.

Discourse about music is also the focus of **Laura Tommaso**'s study, "I Remember When The Beatles Came": A Corpus-Assisted Discourse Study of Women's Musical Oral Histories", which examines first-hand accounts of musical experiences. Using a corpus-assisted discourse study approach to interview data, the research investigates the realisation of stance as a means through which American female fans from the Boomer generation construct meaning and negotiate their positioning within a historically male-dominated cultural space that has often dismissed women's voices. The analysis indicates

that participants employ emotionally rich and evaluative language to construct a nuanced affective stance, combining subjective involvement with a critically informed appreciation. The study further demonstrates how (corpus) linguistics can meaningfully contribute to the exploration of personal and cultural memory.

The collection then turns to the sociolinguistic dimensions of song lyrics. **Giuliana Garzone**'s study, "Pop song Lyrics through the Lens of Sociolinguistics. A Case Study of Bob Dylan's Lyrics", explores pop song lyrics as culturally rich and linguistically distinctive texts, shaped by their tight integration with music and stylistic constraints. Focusing on Bob Dylan's lyrics from 1961 to 1970, it applies a sociolinguistic approach to analyse their phonological, morphological, and syntactic features using both qualitative and corpus-based methods. The analysis highlights how lyrics reflect the artist's linguistic identity and broader patterns of spoken American English and supports the view that song lyrics are valuable data for sociolinguistic investigation.

The analysis of song lyrics is also presented in the article by **María García-Gámez** and **Antonio Moreno-Ortiz**'s investigation, "Sentiment and Emotions in Taylor Swift's Albums. A Journey through the Eras". The study tries to assess whether the emotional and sentimental content aligns with the distinct "eras" Taylor Swift claims to have crafted. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines sentiment time series analysis and emotion ranking based on Parrott's taxonomy, the research reveals a consistent dominance of love and sadness, with an overall negative sentiment. Notably, Swift's lyrics often diverge from sentiment classifications, as emotional expression is conveyed through nuanced, implicit language rather than overtly polarised terms, highlighting her sophisticated use of rhetorical and stylistic devices.

The political potential of music is the focus of two contributions centred on punk. **Stefania M. Maci** and **Silvia Bertulezzi** investigate the lyrics of Green Day through the combined lenses of Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis in their contribution "The Grammar of Dissent. Green Day's Evolving Critique of American Society", by analysing the interconnection among music, language, and social critique. The paper traces the band's evolving commentary on American society, from early anti-establishment themes to more nuanced critiques in recent albums. Their research also underscores the role of punk lyrics in shaping ideological narratives within mainstream culture.

In a similar vein, **Viviana Gaballo**'s study, "Punk Music, Discourse, and Culture. Exploring the Intersection with Edupunk", examines the discursive evolution of punk music and its influence on the edupunk movement, which advocates for learner-centred and anti-authoritarian approaches to education. Using insights from critical discourse analysis, cultural studies, and educational theory, the study analyses punk lyrics and

themes to show how the genre encourages countercultural critique and grassroots activism.

The theme of political critique continues in **Lyndon Way**'s paper, "Oppositional Music Mash Ups: Populist Manifestations in Online Criticism to UK Conservative Government Actions", which analyses the combination of language, visuals, and sound to reveal how these artifacts recontextualise and satirise UK Conservative governments from 2019 to 2024. While rooted in populist aesthetics themselves, these mashups critique and destabilise dominant political narratives. The study highlights the potential of seemingly playful digital texts to function as sites of ideological struggle and contribute meaningfully to public political discourse.

Issues of accessibility and inclusion are foregrounded in **Elena Di Giovanni** "Multisensory Opera: Enhancing the Senses for and with Persons with Visual Disabilities". This contribution examines the evolving landscape of accessible opera in Italy and Europe, highlighting the growing inclusion of individuals with visual disabilities. It begins by tracing shifts in the understanding of disability, accessibility, and inclusion, as shaped by international policies and practical measures. The study then explores case studies of inclusive opera design, emphasising collaborative processes between blind and sighted participants. Drawing on principles of participation and action research, the article presents survey findings that demonstrate increased well-being and empowerment among visually impaired individuals involved in co-designing accessible performances.

The theme of multimodality is explored by **Diego L. Forte**'s study, "A Systemic-Functional Approach to Music, Meaning and Multimodal Transposition", further contributes to multimodal research by proposing a theoretical framework, grounded on systemic-functional linguistics, for analysing music within multimodal constructions. Building on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2005) model for image analysis, the author adapts and expands music categories to accommodate musical meaning, while also drawing on McKerrel (2015) and van Leeuwen (1999). The central hypothesis is that musical meaning is socially constructed and gains significance through its interplay with other semiotic modes, positioning even "absolute music" within broader multimodal discourses shaped by culturally embedded associations.

Patrice Larroque with his contribution "The Close Link Between Language and Music" addresses the phonological features of English, emphasising the shared prosodic and rhythmic structures in speech and song. Drawing on the parallel axes of sequencing and selection in both language and music, the article explores how different elements including word stress, syllable structure, meter, and suprasegmentals function across both domains. By comparing musical and linguistic systems, the study aims to deepen our understanding of English phonology and offer perceptual cues that can support foreign language learners in mastering prosodic patterns through music.

Finally, pedagogical applications are also addressed in **Michael J. Zerbe**'s contribution, "'You Give Love A Bad Name.' Using Popular Song Titles to Teach Direct and Indirect Objects in English". This study explores the effectiveness of employing popular music lyrics to teach English L2 learners the distinction between direct and indirect objects—an area often challenging even for native speakers. Building on prior research highlighting the motivational and pedagogical benefits of music in language learning (Ludke, Morgan 2022; Hua, Li 2015; Ludke 2018), the study adopts a mixed-methods design. A case–control comparison assesses whether lyrics enhance grammatical understanding more effectively than generic instructional language. Follow-up interviews with case group participants provide qualitative insights into students' perceptions of lyrics as a learning tool.

3. Conclusion

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue demonstrate the rich potential of music(al) discourse as a site of scholarly inquiry from multiple linguistic perspectives. From systemic-functional approaches and corpus stylistics to political critique and pedagogical application, the studies presented here illustrate how music functions not only as cultural expression, but also as a multimodal, ideological, and educational force. By weaving together various methodologies and approaches, this volume offers an integrated reflection on the discursive, social, and pedagogical implications of music in contemporary society.

Although this collection may appeal to scholars from a wide range of disciplines – including Linguistics, Musicology, Literature, Sociology, History, Ethnomusicology, Media Studies, and Cultural Studies – it will be particularly valuable to linguists engaged in interdisciplinary research and methodological integration. It exemplifies how linguistic and discourse-analytic methodologies can be applied to music-related texts and contexts, offering a strong foundation for exploring music through a linguistic lens.

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LINES OF LONGITUDE AND LATITUDE
Defining text genres in popular music discourse

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Abstract – This paper explores the discourse of popular music (PMD) and the complex ways in which language is used to represent popular music (PM). After tracing the development of PMD, which established itself as a self-standing type of discourse notably after the rise of rock 'n' roll as a significant phenomenon of mass culture, this paper examines – through a qualitative analysis – the interrelation and characteristics of three main PMD genres: musicology, musicography, and musical biography. Musicology genres, typically authored by music experts, are found to offer top-down categorization and precise analyses of PM as an object of art and craftsmanship and, as such, an object of study and investigation. Musicography genres, mostly written by journalists and critics, focus on the organisation and canonisation of PM as an ongoing process of collective creation. Biography genres, written by musicians themselves or by their acolytes and collaborators, disclose the musicians' personal sphere and present PM as the product of their subjective and emotive creativity. This study highlights the varying rhetorical and semiotic strategies employed in each genre, aiming to contribute to a deeper understanding of PMD as a multifaceted and socially significant discourse practice, revealing how different genres shape and reflect our perception of PM.

Keywords: musicology; musicography; musical biography; music journalism; music discourse.

Reviewing the popular music of the twentieth century as a whole,
most people would probably agree that some of it is excellent,
some unbearable, and most of it very indifferent.
What the good, bad, and indifferent share is a musical language.
(van der Merwe 1989: 3)

1. Introduction

When Marc Woodworth introduced the volume about music writing he co-edited with Ally-Jane Grossan, he claimed that

> writing about music is like dancing about architecture' [...], the writing, obviously enough, doesn't speak to music in its own language [...]. The differences between music itself and language make for the difficulty and the pleasure of writing [...]. Despite all the distance between mediums – and all the

> allowances we might make for that distance – there's an undeniable pleasure when language comes closest, *on its own terms*, to the music. (2015, pp. 2-3, emphasis added)

The present paper focusses precisely on the 'terms' (in the quote above) by which music discourse represents music – by which it tries "to explain the inexplicable" (Frith 2002, p. 236; see also Barthes 1977; Machin 2010; Seeger 1977). It investigates the resources writers use to 'come closest' to what music is through ideation (by variably representing music as art, entertainment, craft, creative process, cultural object, experiential phenomenon, individual expression, etc.), attitude (music as the outlet of emotion or source of interest, appreciation, enjoyment, comfort/discomfort, sharing, etc.), and textualisation (by presenting music as an object of investigation or narration, of experience, of socialisation, etc.).

The main assumption is that music – whether conceived in abstract terms (as a general phenomenon or sensory experience) or in its specific realisations (such as songs) – can be all of the above, i.e., creation, emotion, performance, enjoyment, craftsmanship, etc.: its perception varies in relation to the discoursal choices used to represent it.

This paper deals specifically with the discourse *about* popular music, i.e. that has popular music as its object. For the purpose of this paper, popular music (PM) is intended here as

> a hybrid of musical tradition, styles, and influences [embodying] a fundamental tension between the essential creativity of the act of 'making music' and the commercial nature of the bulk of its production and dissemination. (Shuker 2001, p. 7)

and

> music that has a wide following, is produced by contemporary artists and composers, and does not require public subsidy to survive, [thus ruling] out classical music and publicly supported orchestras, [while including] rock and roll, pop, rap, bebop, jazz, blues and many other genres. (Connolly, Krueger 2006, p. 667).

The focus on PM discourse (PMD) underlying this analysis is due to the fact that the establishing of PM as an object of cultural relevance is fairly recent (Middleton 1990), dating back to the early 1970s, when "rock music – like, for instance, film, photography, the detective story, science fiction and jazz – has moved upmarket in terms of status [when] 'new intellectuals' begun to make 'enjoyment on the spot' a subject for serious treatment, first in the press, later in book" (Lindberg *et al.* 2005, pp. 1-2), thus moving PM from the rank of 'entertainment' (or heteronomous cultural object, cf. Bourdieu 1992) to that of 'art' (autonomous cultural object). In this context, the

language used to make PM discursively handable and appealing is a resource whose forms and functions are worth investigating (Frith and Goodwin 1990). In fact, PMD is a type of discourse that balances efficiency – granted by the upholding of discursive standards ensuring recognisability and transparence to texts, and conferring referential solidity to the object of discussion (Jones 2002; Lindberg *et al.* 2005) – and effectiveness – typically embodied by idiosyncrasies and personal preferences of the individual writers that confer originality, maximise impact, and enhance appeal (Woodworth and Grossan 2015). In this way, a text about PM maintains its poignancy and interest even once the novelty and the ephemeral relevance (Middleton 1990) of its subject dissipates (simply put, after the consumption of the PM object – songs, album, gig). In this sense, "music writers [...] invented a form that hadn't existed before: 'serious' responses to what had only been considered disposable pop product about which no one would think to write anything at all" (Woodworth 2015, p. 1), and did so through discoursal resources drawn from various domain (Lindberg *et al.* 2005; Machin 2010; Woodwoth and Grossan 2015) such as literature (notably poetry and narrative), social research, ethnography, biography, and cultural analysis (Jones 2002) – differently selected and combined depending on the slant of the writer's approach, which may range from "the creative, the recondite, the wry, the historically obsessive" etc. (Moody 2015, p. xii). This discourse has actively contributed, and still contributes, to representing PM as a cultural object of its own right, that is, as a form of art rather than mere entertainment (Bourdieu 1992), with the same aesthetic validity and artistic dignity as those art forms that have traditionally been considered as more 'noble', like classical or 'serious' music.

1.1. Literature review

Until the late 1960s and early 1970s, academic research on PM was relatively limited and largely considered a subset of media studies (Crozier 1996; Lindberg *et al.* 2005). This scarcity, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Adorno 1941), can be attributed to the fact that PM only became a significant subject of research – whether musicological or social – with the rise and subsequent development of rock 'n' roll in the mid-1950s, that is, when this form of 'light' music was incorporated "into the repertoire of the hegemonic bloc" of PM production (Middleton 1990, p. 18), disseminated through the media, controlled by the music industry, and firmly established as a mass culture phenomenon, gradually overshadowing earlier PM forms such as folk, spiritual and gospel, blues, jazz, country and western, movie scores or the Tin Pan Alley / Denmark Street tradition of dance-band style songs (Middleton 1990, p. 38). Since the early 1970s, research on PM (where the music is the object of investigation) has expanded considerably, developing

along various trajectories. Broadly speaking, these include a positivist one (Middleton 1990) that focusses on categorisation and organising principles for understanding PM phenomena (Fabbri 1982; Hamm 1982; Mantere and Kurkela 2015; Negus 1999; Tagg 2013; Théberge 1997), an aesthetic and cognitive one, which assesses PM as an object of emotion, creativity and performance (Fritz and Jentschke 2009; Francès 1988; Godlovitch 1998; Hallam 2001), and a sociological or critical one, which examines PM as a reflection of social relations (Clayton *et al.* 2012; Frith 1978, 1996; Middleton 1990; Morley 2002). By contrast, research on PMD (where the object of investigation is the discourse on PM itself), to this day, remains relatively limited and little homogeneous, mainly due to the diverse and multifaceted nature of this type of discourse. In fact, PMD includes, on the one hand, the discourse used by scholars with theoretical musical knowledge, who assess and map PM based on music theory principles and aesthetic criteria, often for pedagogical aims. On the other hand, it encompasses the language utilised by journalists and music critics, who discuss PM with the purpose "to arbiter taste" (Lindberg *et al.* 2005, p. 17) employing "reasonable arguments [that combine] 'impressionist subjectivity' and 'committed objectivity'" (Lindberg *et al.* 2005, p. 13). Finally, it includes the discourse of musical biographies, which explore the musicians' "ramifications of subjectivity" (Pekacz 2017, p. 3) and offer insights into PM as a personal act of creation.

Studies on scholarly PMD typically approach expert PMD from either a historical or a comparative perspective, exploring music theories and traditions (e.g., historical or perceptual musicology, ethnomusicology, music structuralism, performance studies, etc.), their development over time and across cultures (Clayton *et al.* 2012; Frith and Goodwin 1990; Herbert 2012; Nettl and Bohlman 1991; Tomlinson 2012), their distinctive features (Bergeron and Bohlman 1992; Bohlman 1993; Feld 1994; Floyd 1991) and their pedagogical transmission (Campbell 1991; Green 1997, 2008). A more cohesive set of studies, instead, is devoted to journalistic PMD, following specific lines of inquiry, notably, a diachronic one, mapping the origin and evolution of music journalism (Gorman 2001, 2023; Jones 2002; Roe and Carlsson 1990), a comparative one, examining different ways of writing about PM (Heylin 1992; Hoskyns 2003; Torkelson Weber 2016; Woodworth and Grossan 2015), and a socio-cultural one, analysing how music journalism contributes to the cultural legitimisation of PM (Lindberg *et al.* 2005; Martin 1993; McDonnell and Powers 1995; McLeod 2002).

Studies on biographical PMD, a field that has regained scholarly interest in recent decades after being sidelined in favour of more scientific and formal approaches to music, challenge the notion of musical autonomy and aesthetic self-referentiality, and the idea that music is solely a product of its time and culture (Adorno 1941; Clark 2012; Swinkin 2015), emphasising,

instead, the musicians' authenticity and the role of their creative impulses in the act of music-making. However, research in this domain has predominantly focussed on 'serious' composers rather than PM musicians (Mantere and Kurkela 2015; Lennenber 2019; Pekacz 2004, 2017; Wiley and Watt 2019).

Despite the depth and articulation of these three approaches to PMD, there remains a significant gap in accounting for them jointly – namely, in analysing both the commonalities that bind them and the specificities of their respective traditions. This paper aims to assess that gap from a critical, genre-based, and discourse-oriented perspective. In doing so, it seeks to outline the interrelations and typical characteristics of the various PMD genres, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of PMD as a multifaceted discursive phenomenon.

2. Methodology: PMD as social practice

PMD is assessed here in critical analytical terms as social practice, thus as a "relatively stabilised form of social activity" (Fairclough 2001, p. 231; see also Fairclough 2003), accounting for "the ways things are generally done or happen in particular areas of social life [especially when] representing specific aspects of music life" (Aleshinskaya 2013, p. 425). Within this framework, genres are defined as the "means of organizing and formalizing social interaction in the sphere of contemporary musical art" (Aleshinskaya 2013, p. 425), where discourse affordances are strategically exploited to communicate music-related content in specific contexts and for specific purposes (i.e inform, entertain, instruct, etc.).

This analysis is a qualitative account[1] of the various genres through which PMD is realised. It is meant to offer an outline of the genres in PMD and their salient features, namely those which are typically (if not exclusively) found in this thematic domain, irrespective of the actual frequency of their use, that may vary due to merely contextual reasons (i.e. compliance to editorial guidelines, status of the writer, popularity of the musician, type and domain-specificity of the music object being discussed, etc.). The variables considered here to understand PMD genres regard the social agents, social relation, the purpose, and the content of music-related communicative acts.

[1] Although this analysis is based on a relatively extensive corpus of 490 PMD texts – either read in full or carefully skimmed – the classification of PMD genres (§3) and their discursive features (§4) is not determined by frequency counts or computational criteria. Instead, it draws on observable trends and recurring patterns that appear to be characteristic of each genre, regardless of their overall frequency.

2.1. Social agents

Unlike other communicative settings (notably, professional, specialised, academic, operative or 'paid-work related' ones, cf. Aleshinskaya 2013, p. 425; Gunnarsson 2009, p. 9; see also Bhatia 1993, 2004) – where agents are members of communities of discourse or practice sharing comparable competence, experience, needs, and goals – the domain of PM is not restricted to PM community members (i.e. musicians, people working for music companies or outlets, members of professional associations, etc., cf. Chung *et al*. 2007; Lindberg *et al*. 2005; Woodworth and Grossan 2015), but it grants access to a more diversified range of agents. To better understand PMD as socialisation it is thus relevant to distinguish agents according to their roles as *senders* or *intended audience*.

2.1.1. Senders

Senders in music-related communication can be *internal*, *proximal* or *external* to the act of music-making.

2.1.1.1. Internal agents

Internal agents are creators, those directly involved in (or present during) the act of music creation, completion, and performance, as either main responsible, assistants or direct witnesses (vocalists, players, producers, sound engineers, managers, record manufacturers, etc.). As such, they hold an internal perspective on music-making: they had an active role in shaping music objects and/or making them available, and now they transform their experience into text.

2.1.1.2. Proximal agents

Proximal agents are associates, relevant others, relatives, friends or acquaintances of the creators. Given such a privileged bond, they may disclose little known pieces of information concerning contexts, anecdotes, attitudes or backstories about the genesis of some piece of music, despite not participating directly in or being present for the actual act of music-making. Proximal agents offer a personal perspective: even though they were not actively involved, they were around when pieces of music were created.

2.1.1.3. External agents

External agents are those who evaluate, analyze, write about or teach other-produced music objects. External agents may include experts or journalists. Experts are typically musicologists, with qualifications acquired through

conservatoire training or degrees, subscribing to "an agreed account of musical tradition or art history [and] to institutional principles of musical analysis or artistic techniques" (Frith 2002, p. 236). PM journalists and critics, instead, are writers having acquired credibility and authoritativeness by writing for established magazines and PM publications (Fenster 2002, p. 83), thus being recognised by readers as aesthetic arbiters (Cloonan 2002, p. 128), cultural mediators (Stratton 1982), professional opinion leaders and consumer's guides (Fenster 2002, p. 82), whose task is to listen carefully to the music, ponder its aesthetic qualities and offer their informed judgement (Lindberg *et al.* 2005). External agents have an extrinsic perspective on music-making: although they did not contribute to creating music – but possibly only to promoting and circulating it – they transform into text their sensitivity, knowledge and the impression they received from listening to or studying a piece of music.

2.1.2. Intended audience

The target audience of music-related texts can be represented by *experts*, *semi-experts* or *non-experts*.

2.1.2.1. Experts

Experts are part of a restricted community of discourse and practice (scholars, composers, performers) whose members share the same competence (though at different degrees) and needs. Competence may stem from formal musical education and training – this being the case of musicologists, "musically sophisticated students" (Woodworth 2015, p. 2) or teachers – or from professional experience in music composition, arrangements, performance, or even instrument design, which is reflected in "a good understanding of specific musical phenomena" (Aleshinskaya 2013, p. 438). Such epistemological competence is typically accompanied by a solid mastery of the domain-specific language. Experts' needs may be related to their willingness to expand their specialised knowledge either for the sake of acquiring an in-depth understanding of a music object, or for such knowledge to be applied to practical contexts (creation, completion, performance, or pedagogy).

2.1.2.2. Semi-experts

Semi-experts are readers whose knowledge of PM stems from their interest in the domain as record buyers, would-be musicians, devoted music fans (Aleshinskaya 2013), "well-educated connoisseurs" (Gudmundsson *et al.* 2002, p. 57) or 'niche audiences' (Woodworth 2015, p. 2) of readers who wish to expand their PM-related encyclopedic knowledge. For this reason, if

they are unlikely to be familiar with the specialised discourse of PM academic research, they are instead familiar with journalistic PMD practices. Their lack of musical training or scholarly education is not a hindrance, in that their interest in PM is for typically informative reasons – and only peripherally for applied or operative ones.

2.1.2.3. Non-experts

Non-experts are users with neither expertise nor specific interest in acquiring or expanding PM encyclopedic knowledge, but who have a general curiosity about very specific and circumscribed aspects of PM – especially about some musicians. Non-experts may be little familiar, not only with academic registers, but possibly also with the style and terminology typically found in PM journalism. This is not a concern in that they are likely to be willing to read about anecdotes or discover the exegesis of a piece of music rather than be able to analyze it or assess its aesthetic merit.

The distinction concerning PM social agents allows us to also define the type of social relation and purpose that influence generic choices.

2.2. Social relation

Although most domain-specific communication is vertical or asymmetric – being produced by those having relevant information and meant for those lacking relevant information – within PMD it is possible to distinguish between three types of relations: *vertical proper, quasi-vertical* and *quasi-horizontal*.

2.2.1. Vertical relations

Vertical proper is the type of relation between providers of information and an audience who need to acquire it, notably experts (Aleshinskaya 2013, p. 430). In this case verticality is represented by aligning to a very specific and gate-keeping language, which grants adequacy of content treatment and communicative comprehensibility. This relation is reader-responsible and exclusive, in that contents are accessible only or primarily to those mastering domain-specific discourse conventions.

2.2.2. Quasi-vertical relation

Quasi-vertical relation is the one between the provider of information and an audience who are mainly interested in it, notably semi-experts. In this case (the impression of) verticality is represented by textualisations which, in terms of micro-language (terminology and phraseology) and macro-language (information packaging), opt for apparently gate-keeping resources and

strategies[2] – but which are in reality merely domain-specific and conventional (Aleshinskaya 2013; Woodworth and Grossan 2015) – that is, they are not used for exclusive purposes, but rather to confer relevance and dignity upon the content, and stimulate readers' involvement by implying a certain level of PM knowledge on their part.

2.2.3. Quasi-horizontal relation

Quasi-horizontal is the relation between the information provider and an audience that are simply curious about certain aspects of PM, typically non-experts. Given the likely superficial interest of the readers, this type of relation produces writer-responsible texts, whereby writers need to make their texts linguistically easy to process (hence as 'horizontal' as possible) in order to attract and maintain the reader's attention.

2.3. Purpose

The purposes of PMD are of three different types – aligning to the types of relation seen above – namely, *instruct, inform* and *engage*.

2.3.1. Instruct

Instruct purpose is embodied in vertical relations: this purpose is central in those PMD genres meant to expand the abstract competence of the reader, very often for operative and applied reason (for such competence to be useful when creating PM, finessing it, performing it, investigating it or teaching it).

2.3.2. Inform

Inform purpose is reflected in quasi-vertical relations: this is the main aim of genres meant to provide and organise (even varied and complex) PM-related information aimed at responding to the readers' specific interest and expanding their encyclopedic knowledge.

2.3.3. Engage

Engage purpose is typical of quasi-horizontal relations: this is the purpose of PMD genres meant to satisfy the readers' general interest, for them to have

[2] PM "critics have been responsible for the growth of a public aesthetic discourse with strong 'heteroglot' traces – a hybrid discourse in which elements of 'high theory' mingle with discursive practices derived from everyday intercourse with the music" (Lindberg *et al.* 2005, p 4).

some basic knowledge of specific aspects of the artist's life and creative output.

2.4. Content

PMD genres and their semiotic specificities are to be understood also in relation to their content. Although in abstract terms the content of such genres is PM, the concept of PM points to articulated sets of referents whose relevance depends on the epistemologies of the communicative context, the social agents involved and their roles, and the purpose of socialisation (Middleton 1990; Machin 2010). In order to assess this variability, it is useful to organise contents into different groupings: notably, when PM is dealt with as *object*, as *process*, or as *product*.

2.4.1. Object

PM as object is found in those texts where PM is discussed in terms of tecnhé, i.e. by focussing on formal and technical aspects concerning its creation, completion and performance (Di Scipio 1995; Rehding 2021; Siertsema 1962). Music as objects is thus assessed on the basis of its component parts, defined according to domain-specific criteria (i.e. notation, timbre, pitch, structure, etc.), which are thus taken apart and analyzed on the basis of specific epistemological categories (i.e. melody, harmony, rhythm, etc.) for the music object, its parts and their interplay to be comprehended by the ideal reader.

2.4.2. Process

PM as process is the notional centre of texts where the focus is on music as a social and experiential phenomenon or collective reality (Cook 1990), stemming from the interplay of several variables, among which strictly social ones (i.e. the musicians' age, taste, kinship, will to be part of a community, will to impress, etc.), structural ones (i.e. the availability and accessibility of certain affordances – notably instrumentation, phonographic support, venues, media programs, etc. – and their influence on music-making), and notional ones (i.e. recognisable formats, styles, genres of music, etc.). The focus is neither on PM objects nor on single musicians, but rather on framing PM outputs on the basis of some commonalities across pieces of music, various musicians and contexts.

2.4.3. Product

PM as product is the subject of texts where music is seen as the output of a specific musician or restricted group of musicians (a band), as a peculiar form

of self-expression, and the result of personal hypostases – experiences, sensitivity, psychology, etc. (Barthes 1977) – which, precisely for their role in the act of music creation, finessing and performance, confer uniqueness and a personal or anecdotal dimension to such a product.

3. Results: PMD genres

On the basis of the criteria above, three main macro-genres (each containing possible sub-genres) can be identified in PMD, namely, *musicology*, *musicography*, and *biography* genres. The table below outlines the main features of these PMD genres.

	sender	*audience*	*relation*	*purpose*	*content*
Musicology Genres	external	expert	vertical	instruct	PM object
Musicography Genres					
Review	external	semi-expert	quasi-vertical	inform	PM object
Overview	external	semi-expert	quasi-vertical	inform	PM process
Interview	external	semi-expert non-experts	quasi-horizontal	inform engage	PM process PM product
Biography Genres					
Biography	external	non-expert	quasi-horizontal	engage inform	PM product
Dual-Autography	proximal	non-expert semi-expert	quasi-horizontal	inform engage	PM product
Autobiography	internal	non-expert	quasi-horizontal	engage	PM product

Table 1
Outline of generic features in PMD genres.

3.1. Musicology genres

As we can gather from the table above, musicology genres (ranging from research articles to thematic monographs, to collection of essays) are those authored by experts in the domain of musicology (as external agents) and are

targeted to expert audiences, already having solid competences in musicology contents, as well as solid mastery of the codes through which such contents are vertically transferred (to be acquired, rather than negotiated). The purpose for these genres is to expand the readers' competence (instruct), very often for operative reasons (to be used when composing, performing, researching or teaching). The semantics of musicologies concerns PM as object, considered as a datum (i.e. irrespective of the musicians' hypostases) and dealt with from an external perspective (i.e. irrespective of the intuition, opinion and emotion of the writer, or the appreciation and response on the part of the general public). Musicology genres offer anatomies, through detailed analysis (Frith 2002, p. 239) and systematisation: they take apart and deconstruct PM objects according to domain-specific parameters (i.e. notation, scales, intervals, composition and performance techniques). They identify and isolate component parts as elements of techné so as to favour assessment, measuring and understanding, thus "mapping a particular area and distilling key elements of thought about it" (Pickering 2010, p. 474) and, at the same time, corroborating the efficacy of such parameters. In this sense musicology genres provide a top-down framing of PM, that is a categorial systematisation whereby PM objects are dissected and filtered through representational parameters which allow for abstraction (relating the single contextual instance to some general system), indexicalisation (relating the particular to the category), and modelisation (relating the separate to some coherent paradigm) in order to facilitate operationalisation – i.e. the application of the theory to PM-related activities.

3.2. Musicography genres

Musicography genres (i.e. reviews, overviews, interviews) are usually authored by journalists or music critics (as external agents[3]) and are targeted to semi-experts, i.e. devotees with advanced knowledge (although not technical) of PM, with the purpose to offer extended and detailed information about PM and musicians for it to be integrated (i.e. quasi-vertically) to the knowledge readers are expected to already possess. PM is here represented as a process, resulting from the interplay between the musician's intention and various contextual factors (time, place, cultural background, age, public response, existing trends, etc.), and interpreted on the basis of the framing writers decide to use to assess such processes. More specifically, musicography genres offer rationalisation, through narrative and canon-

[3] With some notable exception, i.e. Lol Tolhurst, of the band The Cure, authoring a monograph on the Gothic movement, *Goth* (2023), or Jaki Floreck (with Paul Welhan), of the band The Adams Family, authoring *Liverpool Eric's: All the Best Clubs are Downstairs* (2009), about the Liverpool post-punk scene that gravitated toward the club Eric's.

construction: they highlight the connection and interaction between PM phenomena (or parts of a PM phenomenon) – by "narrativizing [...] what matters in popular music's recent history [applying] broad critical terms and concepts [...] connecting new sounds with those one has heard, and evaluating these sounds according to certain standards and values of judgment" (Fenster 2002, p. 89) and "plac[ing] performes in a musical/ideological tradition" (Frith 2002, p. 239) – thus providing organisation and harmonisation of heterogeneous material into a cohesive whole, through "the fixing of chaotic and incohate elements in music [...] in a lasting scheme of value" (Reynolds 1990a, p. 9) according to the writer's subjectively selected parameters (i.e. not necessarily scientific or academic, cf. Einarson 2024). These genres offer a bottom-up framing of diverse PM realities, evidencing distinctive features and trends at the phenomenological level that may reveal a coherent continuum or indicate forms of progress and dynamic development at a higher level of abstraction.

With such genres, writer's evaluation is as important as content presentation, but in order to contain the possible threat posited by writer's subjectivity – that is, to resist "eccentric [...] or ambitious writing" (Woodworth and Grossan 2015, p. 92), and enhance the perception of the empirical validity and referential accuracy of the content – writers filters subjective stance through some quasi-objective parameters and organising principles (Lindberg *et al.* 2005). These parameters vary according to the three main musicography sub-genres, namely, *reviews*, *overviews* and *interviews*.

3.2.1. Reviews

Reviews (single or collected in extended texts,[4] track-by-track comments,[5] chronicles,[6] etc.) express the writer's stance about songs, full albums, gigs, discographies, etc. according to aesthetic (standard vs creative, trivial vs symbolic) or cognitive criteria (expected vs unexpected, conventional vs exceptional) – whereby the framing of PM is on the basis of its aesthetic value and impact, by which a music object or event is noteworthy because it stands out.

[4] Cf. Doyle 2022; Pegg 2016.
[5] Cf. Farmer 1998; Swan 2018.
[6] Cf. Endeacott 2014; Parker 2001.

3.2.2. Overviews

Overviews are attempts at mapping complex PM phenomena (movements,[7] PM aesthetics,[8] trends,[9] genres and styles[10] – either general[11] or very localised[12]) according to organising principles drawn from "literary criticism, political theory and cultural studies" (Lindberg *et al.* 2005, p. 280), thus on the basis of temporal (from origin to articulation, from genesis to completion), geographical (from periphery to center), social (from individual to collective), and cultural specificities (from common to salient, from marginal to typical).

3.2.3. Interviews

Interviews (ranging from interviews to single musicians or several band members,[13] to oral histories,[14] which are collective interviews to people even remotely or not concerned with the act of music creation, i.e. scenesters, friends, fans, etc.) are texts where the writer is concealed behind the voice of the interviewees, using their privileged positions and personal experience as an organising principle, thus conferring textual relevance to contents (moving them from private to public, from anecdotal to emblematic, from subjective to empirical and reliable).

3.3. Biography genres

Biography genres are authored by either agents who are internal, external or proximal to the act of music-making. Internal agents (musicians, performers, technicians who were present while PM was being created) are responsible for *autobiographies*. External agents (mainly journalists, but also fans[15] – with no relevant connection with musicians) write *biographies*. Proximal agents (musicians' partners and relatives,[16] friends,[17] collaborators,[18] etc.) author *dual-autography* (Abbott 1988), whereby the story of their own life – in itself of little interest for PM readers – acquires relevance in that it

[7] Cf. Heylin 2008; Robb 2023.
[8] Cf. Cooper, Smay 2001; Meltzer 1970.
[9] Cf. Reynold 1990b; Whiteley 2000.
[10] Cf. Evans 2022; Toop 1995.
[11] Cf. Azerrad 2023; MacIntyre *et al.* 2022.
[12] Cf. Du Noyer 2002; Haslam 2000.
[13] Cf. Woodworth 1998; Zollo 1997.
[14] Cf. Bean 2019; Katz 2024.
[15] Cf. Lurie 2009; Stafford 2020.
[16] Cf. Curtis 2005; McGuinn 2017.
[17] Cf. Butcher 2011; Ronson 2024.
[18] Cf. Brown 2011; Little 2022.

interacts with and sheds light upon the one of the musicians. These three subgenres are appealing to audiences of non-experts, having neither musicological competence nor (necessarily) encyclopedic musical knowledge, but a general curiosity about specific musicians. PM is dealt with as a product, that is a projection of a musician's life experience, to be explained in relation to the artist's attitude, psychology, relationships, break-ups, etc. The purpose of these genres is to satisfy readers' curiosity in engaging ways. Engagement can be achieved in two sensibly different fashions: in the case of autobiographies and dual-autographies, by enhancing subjective stance and personal voice (thus providing readers a way to picture themselves 'in the author's shoes'); in the case of biographies, on the contrary, by containing personal stance and voice (notably personification and overt evaluation, since the reader's curiosity is not about the writer's opinion) and instead maximising referential informativeness (in terms of quantity, accuracy and reliability of the information provided) and, where possible, musician's intervention (by reporting – verbatim or through paraphrases – the musicians' words, opinions, anecdotes, etc.). Biography genres offer stories, through introspection and contextualisation: they provide biographical information, extended anecdotal data, and access to personal opinions in order for the reader to be able to see what is behind and beyond a PM product, and what motivated and affected its coming into being (by presenting PM as the result of a progress from context to outcome, from intention to achievement, from life to art, from personal work to collective consumption).

4. Discussion

4.1. PMD: Acceptability and adequacy

Language is the fabric of text, and texts are semiotisations of content for it to be handable and easily processable by the intended audience. Processability depends not only on referential transparency, but also on the alignment on the part of writers to specific credibility conditions (Hyland 1998, 2005), namely acceptability and adequacy. The former concerns the authors' perceived authoritativeness and knowledge of the contents they are presenting; the latter refers to the way the contents are presented and, more specifically, to their "plausible relationship with reality" (Hyland 1998, p. 440) and the alignment to the "rhetoric of the discourse community" (Hyland 1998, p. 440) which, in the case of PMD genres, is constituted by PM writers, readers, consumers and artists.

Acceptability and adequacy are semiotised differently in the various PMD genres, as can be seen in the table below.

	Acceptability	*Adequacy*
Musicology genres	From membership to academic community	Alignment to community standards Language of exactness
Musicography genres	From access to reliable sources	Ability to map and organize Language of relation
Biography genres	From access to personal hypostases	Language of emotion

Table 2
Acceptability and adequacy features in PMD genres.

In musicology, acceptability is granted by the writers' established membership to the PM academic community, retrievable, for instance, from the type of outlets issuing their contributions (journals, publishing houses, book series,etc.) – on the basis of their circulation and impact factor – or from their citation status (the fact of being often referred to or quoted in academic research). Adequacy stems from alignment to the expert community's standards (in terms of conceptualisations, vocabulary, and formats). Musicologists, in fact, write 'on behalf' of their community. Therefore, musicology genres' discourse hinges on the little visibility of the writer and the little noticeability of their voice, or, at least, on the predominance of logos (language, reasoning, argumentation) over pathos (evaluation, impression, intuition) – see example (1). Although first person pronouns and personalisation can be found in musicology, when writers opt for being textually visible, they tend to lexicalise their persona as emissaries for the academic community (2) engaged in the advancement of disciplinary knowledge (3).

This can be easily observed especially in those parts of the texts with a marked metatextual character (i.e. preface, prologue forewords, epilogue, etc.), where writers anticipate what readers are going to find in the ensuing text, specifying or implying their roles and how their text will approach, assess, segment and deal with the content, as in the examples below.

1) *This book discusses* that struggle in detail within the context of the bands' social and cultural lifestyle. In doing so *it considers* the interrelationships between art and society, *attempting to explore* the tension between creativity and commerce *through description and analysis* of the processes of musical production and performance by the bands. (Cohen 1991, p. 4; emphasis added, as in all examples below)

2) *A good deal has changed in music studies since 2003,* not least in the areas and debates that are explored in the book. [...] For this edition, *we invited all contributors to the first edition to participate again*. We are grateful to all of them for [...] the revisions and

updating that have been made. [...] *Each took the opportunity to consider how they might take account of new interventions into their areas of interest.* (Clayton *et al*. 2012, p. x)

3) *My particular concern* is to suggest that the sociological approach to popular music does not rule out an aesthetic theory, but, on the contrary, makes one possible. [...] *In my own academic work I have examined* how rock is produced and consumed, but there is no way that *a reading of my books* (or those of other sociologists) could be used to explain why some pop songs are good and others are bad. (Frith 2004, p. 32)

While musicology is a domain of research with established epistemologies and discursive conventions to resort to, in musicography acceptability and adequacy are constructed on different grounds. Acceptability is through authorial visibility, that can be expressly established in metatextual sections, where writers claim their competence – or have their competence assessed by recognisable figures in the domain (i.e. musicians, journalists, media personalities, etc.) – by explicitating the type and kind of information in their possession and associating it to reliable sources (4). Adequacy – in terms of referential coherence, more than alignment to given standards – is attained by conferring significance to contents, notably by pointing out how and why their rationalisation and canonisation is relevant or necessary, often referring to gaps in the existing literature, to the absence of a coherent mapping (5), or the scarceness of interest or awareness about a given phenomenon which instead deserves consideration (6).

4) *Grant and I both knew arts culture journalist Neil Cooper*, largely through being interviewed by Neil over the years. We felt his overview of what we were trying to achieve with the book would prove invaluable – it did. *Neil interviewed Geoff Travis [and] spoke to Bob Last and Hilary Morrison to corroborate our thoughts on the Fast Product story*. (MacIntyre *et al.* 2022, pp. 1-2)

5) While I enjoyed the books that had come out on the group, *I felt something was missing* on those rollercoaster rides up and down Go-Stop Boulevard. Or maybe I just needed more Love [...]. That's how I felt about the band. I wanted more about the music itself [...], *there has been no archeological dig for every last bit of their music*, so I figured maybe I should do the exploring. I've come up with a structured song-by-song guide through Love's full catalog. (Spevack 2021, p. 6)

6) *The people in this book had their own particular place 'beyond the pale'*. From Arthur Brown and the Pretty Things in Britain, to the Beau Brummels and Tim Buckley here in America, *the world-absorbing nature of these eclectic artists and the turbulent times around them reflected a world exploding with possibility and impossible dreams.* [...] *This is invariably true about all the artists here*, in relation to the people they eventually influenced. (Kantner 2000, p. vii)

In biography genres, acceptability is realised differently in the case of internal and proximal agents, on the one hand, and external, on the other. The acceptability of the former agents is not in question, given their first-hand

experience with music creation and privileged access to personal hypostases. In such cases authorial presence may be explicitated and emphasised by disclaimers pointing out the personal, subjective, potentially biased and even self-mythologising (or other-mythologising) perspective through which they tell their stories (7). External agents, on the contrary, enhance acceptability by claiming objectivity and reliability – or having it claimed by the biographees themselves (8) – based on their access to first-hand and authoritative sources (9), which makes them trustworthy storytellers of someone else's story. Adequacy as a coherent relationship to reality is also accounted for by these acceptability concerns. While adequacy in terms of alignment to discursive standards – given the range of agents, contents and purpose of these genres, and the consequent lack of homogeneous standards – is of little relevance.

7) *This book may be a pack of lies*. Or the unmitigated truth. It really depends what you prefer to believe. I *have* [emphasis in the original] dutifully researched, as well as trawled the memory banks of myself and others, but have written without being slavish to fact. *These are my memories and I can't demand absolute accuracy of them*, so neither should you. *My story is certainly based on true events but even the most honest of men and women are prone to exaggeration in the pursuit of self-mythology,* wouldn't you agree? (Hussey 2019, p. xi)

8) Thanks John Einarson for wanting to tell the story, for *diligently seeking out the facts from the people who were there* [...] and for putting them accurately into this book for us to reflect upon. For those who want to know what was going on in our lives 30 years ago, this book tells the story. *I don't know how it could have been written any better*. (Furay 2004, p. 7)

9) I always believed for many years that the story of Chic needed to be chronicled in more than simply a chapter or a paragraph in a wider work. [...]. *I then made every attempt to contact everybody associated with the Chic circle. I have been very fortunate that in almost every instance, the ex-members of the group agreed to speak with me*. (Easlea 2004, p. ix)

4.2. PMD: Language and rhetorical choices

PMD is the implement through which to bridge the gap between the difficulty of pinpointing what PM is (Barthes 1977; Machin 2010; Seeger 1977) and the necessity, usefulness or pleasure to write about it. At the micro-linguistic level, language offers tools (vocabulary, phraseology, figuration, etc.) which do not just frame a specific referent as a social, psychological or physical reality, but indeed construe it by "provid[ing] clues as to what we think music is" (Machin 2010, p. 23, see also Frith 1996). Since PM may be experienced differently by individuals (creators, performers, technicians, listeners, experts, music lovers, etc.), different rhetorical standards can be used to relate such experiences, which are represented by the language of *exactness*, the

language of *relation*, and the language of *emotion* – each reflecting the three generic groupings outlined above.

As a matter of fact, musicology genres tend to resort to the language of exactness (or the rhetoric of mathematics, cf. Reyes 2022), typified by choices which are technical and gate-keeping, used to enhance precision and explicitness, to maximise referential transparency and contain approximation and vagueness, as well as to mark the writers' disciplinary competence, "expertise and authority of aesthetics" (Machin 2010, p. 24), as we can see in the examples below:

10) One widely used approach centers on *diatonic modes*. Moore [...] argues that many rock songs and progressions can be understood in *modal terms* (usually *Ionian, Mixolydian, Dorian,* or *Aeolian*); even progressions that appear *chromatic* on the surface, he suggests, can often be reduced to *modal prototypes*. (Temperley 2011, p. 2)

11) In fact, it seems that a number of grunge acts (such as Nirvana, Mudhoney and Soundgarden) and other artists from across the alternative rock field (My Bloody Valentine, Liz Phair, and others) play with the *modal ambiguity* of the *power chord* to great effect. In such music, the *major-minor distinction between modes* is blurred considerably through the use of *third relations* (sometimes called *cross relations*), which involves changing chords by moving up or down in *increments of a third*, and usually contradicting an established *modality*. (McDonald 2000, p. 357)

12) In this context you need to know if the music contains any *melodic figures* and, if so, how many occur at the same time. You also need to identify the *backcloth, if any, against which those figures are profiled*. Then you have to find out how the *figures interact with each other and with the background* and establish any *connotative meaning* you might find in (a) *the figure*, (b) *the ground* and (c) *in the relationship, if any, between figure and ground*. (Tagg 1994, p. 217)

Musicography genres tend to resort to the language of relation (the rhetoric of maps), where relations are to be interpreted both in lexical and semantic terms, and are to be found in resources such as figures and metaphor (relating literal and conventional) (13), adjectives (relating simple and modified), professionalisms (relating general to domain-specific, cf. Aleshinskaya 2013) (14), generalisations (relating single and series), ties (relating several entities), sets (relating part and whole), cues and allusions (relating expressed and implied) (15). This language is rich in "thematically coloured" modification (Aleshinskaya 2013, p. 435), implicitness and evocation, which require and stimulate an active response on the part of the reader (mainly cognitive) who is called upon as someone who can work out such references and their relevance for the interpretation of the meaning, as can be seen in the following examples:

13) True to its *mod origins*, ska was a curiously *sexless dance craze* – its *twitchy energy* appealed *to the feet, but not the hips*. *Mining their most fertile seam of embarrassment*,

Madness's number 1 hit 'House of Fun' – a song about going to buy your first packet of condoms at the chemist's – made sexual awakening seem like a *fall from grace into a world of sordid grotesquerie.* (Reynolds 2005, p. 292)

14) "[...] we'd *sample* our own *guitar feedback*, which instead of just being *one tone*, it could be a *tone having bends and quirks in it* [...]. One of the most sampled songs we created was 'Glider' [...], that's all guitar feedback [...] that we just *sampled* and *played in.*" (McGonigal 2007, p. 56)

15) In many of their songs, Wire pursues the kind of *'simplicity'* that punk musicians favoured, but steers this simplicity in unexpected, *nonpunk directions*, which relates to Rambali's idea that Wire 'stuck to the letter of the'*punk credo*. (Haddon 2020, p. 43)

Biography genres tend to resort to the language of emotion (the rhetoric of empathy), in order to favour impact and elicit an emotive response on the part of the reader. This stimulation may be achieved in different ways: in the case of autobiographies, by allowing readers privileged access to the musician's 'world' (notably through personalisation and anecdotes) (16), and letting them read, form a personal and exclusive perspective, the musician's reaction to given contextual or psychological situations that may have influenced the act of music creation or performance; in the case of biographies or dual-autographies, active involvement can be attained, on the one hand, by providing readers biographical, contextual or anecdotal information through which to interpret the musician's attitude and response to given contexts (17), and, on the other, by resorting, when possible, to the musicians' own words or the words of their assistants, fellow musicians, acolytes, etc. (18), through direct quotations or paraphrases.

16) Emma, Robin and I spend a night recording a cover of Dennis Wilson's 'Falling in Love'. *Freed from the 'my song / Emma's song' competitive pressure, we are effortlessly productive*, *excitedly chiming in with ideas*. *My vocal goes seamlessly and Robin and I are loudly cheering when Emma executes the tricky keyboard solo. She is giggly and playful and fun to be with*. At the end, Robin kicks back in his studio chair, smiling and happy: 'That was fucking great, no?' And I'm thinking, God, why can't it be like this all the time? (Berenyi 2022, p. 236)

17) I didn't know the lyrics of the new material (which was a first – I'd always known all his other songs by heart). As the words began to roll on the teleprompter, my heart sank. *He had written, and he sang, about what a sham he believed the entire length of our marriage to have been.* It was one of the saddest moments of my life. I stood in front of a crowd of thousands and tried to hold back my tears. (Forsberg Weiland 2010, pp. 211-212)

18) 'If You're Gone' was another of Clark's lyrical admission of emotional insecurity, albeit without the melodic grace of his finest work. *It was already evident to the other Byrds that Clark's complicated love life played a key part in inspiring his muse*. 'David Crosby was very aware of that,' Dickinson recalls. 'He would kind of promote it and say, *'Well, as soon as he breaks up with her* [Clark's girlfriend at the time] *we'll get another song*' and stuff like that. (Rogan 2001, p. 146)

5. Concluding remarks

This paper aims to provide a workable outline of PMD genres and their typical features, offering a tentative systematization (though possibly incomplete[19] and open to future refinements) that may be particularly useful given the range and variety of existing discourses that have PM as a referent. Such variety is not merely a matter of writers' personal choice or cultural convention but is instead linked to the complex nature of PM itself. As a matter of fact, PM is a multi-faceted phenomenon (at the same time cultural, cognitive, emotive, structural, and market-based) whose definition is not just complex, but very elusive (Middleton 1990; Shuker 2001). This elusiveness stems not only from its intrinsic phenomenological characteristics but, more significantly, from the perspectives and intentions of those who observe and choose to write about it. Each approach towards PM representation, in fact, is likely to provide a very specific understanding of it, which is different for experts, musicians, fans, music enthusiasts, scholars, students, practitioners, etc. Precisely due to the variety of contexts where PM contents are textualised, very specific discourse resources are needed for their semiotisation, firstly, for music-related texts to be clear and transparent and, secondly, for their main referent – PM itself – to be cognitively handable, so that, in plain terms, we know what we are referring to when we write/read about PM. Through this analysis we have seen how different types of competence, aim, and interest that writers/readers may have predict different discursive framings through which to look at PM.

These framings are not only effective and appropriate to given contexts (i.e. for expert, semi-expert or non-expert readers; in vertical, quasi-vertical or quasi-horizontal communication; to instruct, inform, or engage), but will also produce different readings of PM, by casting a specific light on given meanings (technical, social, emotive, etc.), and by emphasising certain features as essential, character-defining and worth noticing, while downplaying others as being less significant, little interesting, idiosyncratic or even irrelevant.

This study has sought to provide a workable outline of such framing resources – namely, of PMD genres – through which PM acquires diverse

[19] Potential limitations reside in the fact that – although the criteria offered here can be applied to broader analyses – this paper does not assess trends of generic variations over time (PMD in the 1970s, 1980s 1990s, etc.) or across cultures (e.g. British and American PM journalism, for instance, have very different histories, developments and traditions; cf. Lindberg *et al.* 2005; Gorman 2023). Nor does it consider other variables that may bias PMD such as, for instance, the popularity of the musicians or of a given style of PM (Sala 2024) – notably, its inclusion in the canon or 'hegemonic bloc' (Middleton 1990) or exclusion from it – as well as the status and recognisability of the PMD writers (Jones 2002), their education (Clayton *et al.* 2012) and their gender (Gleeson, Gordon 2022), among others aspects.

and distinct referential values: as a work of art, or an object of craftsmanship, defined and analysed in technical terms, in musicology genres; as an ongoing and articulated process of creation, refinement and cross-pollination requiring organisation, rationalisation and canonisation (Fenster 2002), in musicography genres; as the result of some subjective expression and personal experience worth narrating, in biography genres. As such, PMD is not only or mainly a matter of vocabulary, information packaging and style, but, more distinctively, a series of generic choices whereby "to cast different degrees of illumination on music's many mysteries, to link them together to create new paths" of meaning (Rogers 2022, p. 8).

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AMERICA'S GREATEST ROCK CRITIC
A Corpus Stylistics Investigation on Lester Bangs's Texts

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Abstract – Lester Bangs is considered one of the most influential figures in rock journalism. His writing, which conveyed acute observations on Western popular music, was characterized by a highly personal blend of first-person immersion, the use of literary personas, and direct engagement with the reader. This paper investigates Bangs's idiosyncratic style with a corpus-stylistics approach, seeking to shed light on his favored linguistic devices and the broader sociocultural environment of the music press, both vastly understudied areas in applied linguistics. The analysis was carried out on a sample corpus comprising articles authored by Lester Bangs (68 texts, ~137,000 words, ~16,000 tokens). This study systematically identified Bangs's stylistic choices in presenting speech and thought using Semino and Short's model (2004). The corpus was annotated using CATMA 7.1 (Meister 2023), which permits text-external annotation with customized tagsets. The findings indicated that Bangs consistently employed free direct speech (FDS), accounting for 28% of all annotated instances of speech and thought presentation. Bangs extensively used FDS as a stylistic trademark to emulate speech, thus building his literary personas and mirroring his influences from Beat prose. (Free) indirect thought is also prominent, allowing Bangs to engage in self-reflection. Bangs's peculiar writings offer an entry point into the style of music journalism, a peculiar combination of cultural critique and aesthetic commentary suitable for multidisciplinary frameworks in the humanities.

Keywords: Lester Bangs; music press; applied linguistics; corpus linguistics; stylistics.

1. Introduction

This paper analyzes Lester Bangs's writings using a corpus linguistics framework. The corpus investigation systematically identifies and evaluates the author's recurring stylistic patterns, shedding light on his writing techniques and discursive features. The American critic Lester Bangs (1948–1982) is widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in rock journalism (Berthomier 2024; DeRogatis 2001). His personality was multifaceted, characterized by substance abuse and personal struggles during

childhood.[1] While an editor at *Creem* and *Rolling Stone* in the 1970s, he exhibited erratic behavior, including drunken stupors and a confrontational attitude toward rock stars (e.g., Lou Reed). However, Bangs also demonstrated acute engagement with popular music and culture in his writings (Jones and Featherly 2002). His premature death from an accidental overdose cemented his cult status in American culture (DeRogatis 2001).

Bangs's writings mirrored the "kind, magnetic, righteous, outrageously funny, and occasionally frustrating man behind his persona" (DeRogatis 2001, p. xiv). Drawing influence from Beat poetry, he crafted a style that emulated the disruptiveness and vitality of rock 'n' roll, thus detaching himself from the academic tone of contemporaries such as Robert Christgau and Greil Marcus. His background as a budding novelist resulted in a highly distinctive style, blurring the lines between fiction and cultural commentary. For these reasons, he is also associated with the New Journalism movement (Wolfe 1973), which sought to disrupt the traditional rules of journalism.

Bangs's unique style and insightful commentaries were met with acclaim by music journalists (Bustillos 2012; Flaherty 2024; Garner 2000), granting him cult status in American popular culture. The author was portrayed by Philip Seymour Hoffman in the Academy Award-nominated film *Almost Famous*. In addition, his essay *How To Be a Rock Critic* (Bangs 1974) was adapted into an Off-Broadway play in 2018. However, his cultural relevance has largely been overlooked in cultural and linguistic studies. Few scholars in cultural studies have investigated his themes in detail, such as rock music's eternal dream (Berthomier 2013; Jones and Featherly 2002) and the influence of core American myths (Berthomier 2024). Undoubtedly, additional research in culture and media studies could further explore the themes and social context associated with Bangs. However, the best gateway to understanding Bangs's engagement with popular music lies in his distinctive style, particularly his use of personas, first-person immersion, and different registers. His language encompassed every facet of his personality: the novelist, the journalist, the fan, and the provocateur. While the previously cited works provide valuable insights into Bangs's language, this aspect has not been systematically investigated from an applied linguistics perspective.

This paper aims to fill this gap using a corpus stylistics approach based on Semino and Short's *Corpus Stylistics* (2004). Their manual investigates a corpus of fiction and non-fiction texts through a text linguistics and stylistics lens (cf. Leech and Short 1981). Their revised speech, writing, and thought presentation model accounts for content, style, and effect on the reader. Bangs blurred the lines between fiction and non-fiction and sought to engage

[1] Lester Bangs's biography *Let It Blurt* (DeRogatis 2001) offers valuable insight into the main constants and events of the author's childhood – his education as a Jehovas's witness and the premature and violent death of his father.

the reader with his boisterous writing, experimenting with different stylistic devices. Semino and Short's model allows for the analysis of all these aspects.

This study focuses on the presentation of speech and thought, identifying and evaluating the author's peculiar usage of these stylistic features. The analysis was conducted on a sample corpus made up of texts sourced from the online database *rocksbackpages.com*. Bangs's writings were manually annotated using CATMA 7.1 (Meister 2023), an online software based on text-external annotation. The tags and annotations adhered to Semino and Short's thought and speech presentation categories.

Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on Lester Bangs's impact on music journalism and corpus stylistics, situating the paper within a multidisciplinary framework that embraces cultural studies and applied linguistics. Section 3 describes the methods employed for this study: corpus building, the selection of descriptors, and the annotation system. Some difficulties were encountered during the compilation of the corpus—i.e., selection bias, size, and balance. In addition, the annotation process involved ambiguities in the identification of stylistic categories (a problem also encountered by Semino and Short). These limitations will also be discussed. Section 4 critically evaluates Bangs's use of speech and thought presentation, focusing on his persona creation, his shifting registers, and the discursive material underpinning his writings.

2. Literature review

Bangs's production must be contextualized within the music press,[2] which was centered on the production of news regarding popular music[3] (Jones 2002). More specifically, Bangs developed as a writer in the cultural environment of rock journalism, which started as an amateur practice in the 1960s before becoming "a staple of entertainment reporting" in the 1980s (Jones and Featherly 2002, p. 34). Music journalism differs from traditional "hard" journalism (Forde 2003) because of the evaluative and subjective nature of the articles and the lack of formal training among music journalists. Bangs, like his contemporary peers Greil Marcus, Dave Marsh, and Jann Wenner,[4] did not receive journalistic or musical education (DeRogatis 2001). Instead, they crafted a characteristic journalistic style, consisting of high- and low-brow intertextual references (Gudmundsson *et al*. 2002) merged with

[2] The terms "music press" and "music journalism" will be used interchangeably.
[3] Popular music is defined in this paper as mass-distributed, recorded sounds (Tagg 1982).
[4] These authors are considered key figures for the development of music journalism (see DeRogatis 2001, Grafe and McKeown 2024, Jones 2002).

strongly subjective points of view. The music press "grew up side by side, page to page" (Jones and Featherly 2002: 38) with New Journalism (1973), which also challenged the traditional rules of objectivity and neutrality in journalism (Weingarten 2010).

Lester Bangs created his own voice in this fervent cultural landscape. His writings are based on the adoption of different literary personas (Sheinbaum 2004), using different voices and perspectives to convey his opinions on music and culture. For example, his early *Creem* reviews were characterized by misspellings and swear words, and he moved toward contemplative analysis during his time at *The Village Voice*. Despite these shifts in personas, we can trace constant themes in his production. First, he always advocated for the "gritty, grungy, gully-bottom rock and roll" (Jones and Featherly 2002, p. 34), seeking to discover new musical genres that would "keep the torch alight" (ibid., p. 34). Bangs aimed to bridge the gap between music and writing, trying to adapt rock 'n' roll's fury into prose. In this regard, we can draw a parallel with Kerouac's spontaneous prose (Hunt 2014), influenced by jazz and bebop's liveliness.

Bangs's output occupies a liminal space between fiction and non-fiction. He approached music as a fan rather than a critic and filtered his interest through "the big social picture he perceived" (Jones and Featherly 2002, p. 26) by adopting different literary personas. Further insight into his themes and style was provided by Berthomier (2011, 2024). The researcher stated that Bangs's lively and improvisational style differed from the more structured and collected approach of his colleagues, such as Robert Christgau (Berthomier 2011). She also underscored Bangs's desire for the constant renewal of rock 'n' roll, which was also noted by Jones and Featherly (2002). In a later paper, Berthomier also noted an overarching lack of nuance in Bangs's production, which mirrored his Manichean vision of music—e.g., mainstream rock opposed to underground, rebellious music. The claims in these studies are made by commenting on excerpts from Bangs's writings. However, none of these studies illustrate the criteria behind the selection of texts, hindering transparency and objectivity. In addition, these studies also lack a linguistic framework that could have enhanced the reliability of their claims. Bangs's production implies stylistic and discursive angles. The author represented large cultural patterns in his writings, giving subjective representations of the events and social actors involved in the production of rock music.

Considering these issues, corpus stylistics offers tools that can account for these multiple perspectives. Corpus stylistics can summarily be defined as the study of stylistic textual features on corpora (Mahlberg 2013). This definition implies a broad range of corpus techniques applied to different text genres. Toolan (2009) conducted a keyword analysis in short stories, demonstrating how keywords contribute to the progression of the narrative.

McIntyre (2010) used corpus stylistics to investigate character distinctions in the film *Reservoir Dogs*. Stylistics has also been employed in linguistic studies of media, albeit with some theoretical differences. For instance, Molek-Kozakowsa and Wilk (2021) conducted a news values stylistic analysis of a populist newsfeed corpus. The researchers noted how the casual and colloquial stylistic devices used in these newsfeeds make politics more engaging. However, in this paper, stylistics and corpus linguistics overlap without forming an interdisciplinary framework.

When approaching Lester Bangs, we must account for complex stylistic phenomena and the hybrid nature of his texts, which deviates from traditional journalism. The revised speech, writing, and thought presentation model of English writing by Semino and Short (2004) was chosen as this paper's corpus stylistics framework. The authors not only analyzed a corpus of written fiction in English, but also focused non-fiction, including journalistic language – a vastly understudied area in corpus stylistics, even to date. The authors identified the differences between novels and news reporting, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Their model expands on Leech and Short (1981), which analyzed literary texts using a text linguistics approach. Furthermore, they provide a detailed taxonomy of stylistic strategies that also have discursive implications. This corpus stylistics framework has primarily been used for literary investigations. McIntyre (2015) analyzed the occurrences of various types of speech in Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. McIntyre found that, compared to other novels, Haddon's work contained more instances of direct speech. However, he also pointed out that "statistical analysis will only take us so far in explaining the stylistic effects associated with this relative overuse" (2015, p. 64), hinting at a more qualitative interpretation based on close reading.

Semino and Short's framework can thus effectively unearth Bangs's stylistic complexities, supported by corpus linguistics' quantitative angle. This methodology involves close reading, which permits the identification of the thematic and stylistic features explored in the previous paragraphs: the influence of Beat prose, the adoption of literary personas, and his quest for the renewal of rock 'n' roll energy. Bangs's texts also have discursive value, as they involve a "set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events" (Burr 1995, p. 48).

3. Methodology

3.1. Aim and research questions

This paper seeks to analyze Bangs's distinctive stylistic strategies, focusing on the presentation of speech and thought. More specifically, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1) How did Bangs represent speech and thought in his text?
2) How do different literary *personas* emerge in the author's production?
3) Which are Bangs's main discourses on rock music and popular culture?

The investigation is based on a corpus comprising Lester Bangs's writings, built following the methods in Egbert, Biber, and Gray (2022). The corpus analysis is based on the speech and thought presentation (S&TP) categories found in Semino and Short (2004).[5] These categories were annotated using CATMA 7.1, after which the instances of S&TP were analyzed with a bottom-up approach (Gillings and Mautner 2023). The analysis in Section 4 illustrates three idiosyncratic features in Bangs's production: his unconventional use of free direct speech, his narrative approach, and his self-reflective demeanor.

3.2. Corpus building

For this paper, the target language domain, which can be defined as "the full universe of language use a researcher wants to learn about" (Egbert *et al*. 2022, p. 73), is Lester Bangs's written output. Unfortunately, no archive containing the author's entire production is available to date. The target domain must thus be operationalized by identifying texts suitable for inclusion in the corpus. Lester Bangs's anthologies[6] may reflect the editor's bias in data selection, thus likely yielding an unrepresentative dataset. Similarly, *Rolling Stone*'s website includes articles written by Bangs during his years as an editor. However, relying on a single source might lead to an underrepresentation of the author's literary personas, which varied according to the publication source.

Rocksbackpages.com was chosen as the operational domain. This online archive features a selection of texts written by Bangs – no editor is

[5] For brevity, the acronym "S&TP" will replace the expression "speech and thought presentation" from now on.

[6] See *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung* (Marcus 2001) and *Main Lines, Blood Feasts and Bad Taste* (Morthland 2008).

credited for selecting texts for inclusion in the archive. Furthermore, Bangs's works on *rocksbackpages.com* were originally published in different magazines over a 12-year timespan (1969–1981). These features account for the shifting stylistic and discursive characteristics of Bangs's output.

All of Bangs's texts available on the website were sampled in their entirety and saved without additional HTML annotation. Metadata were included in the file names (Table 1). The main features of the corpus are illustrated in Tables 2 and 3.

Identifier	**Name of the written piece**	**Year of publication**
LB	A science fiction rock spectacle	1971

Table 1
Example of metadata in the .txt file names.

General information on the corpus	
Number of texts	68
Word tokens	137264
Word types	16466
Mean Length of Texts	2044.44 tokens
Timespan	1969-1981

Table 2
General information on the corpus.

Information on publication and text types	
Name of the publishing platform (number of texts)	*Phonograph Record* (15), *Circus* (10), *New Musical Express* (9), *Creem* (8), *Rolling Stone* (6), Unpublished (5), *Let it Rock* (4), *Musician* (2), *The Village Voice* (2), *CNT Records* (1), *Fusion* (1), *ROIR Records* (1), *Stereo Review* (1), *Shakin' Street Gazzette* (1), *Music Gig* (1), *Screw* (1).
Text genres (number of texts)	Album reviews (35), interviews (10), essays (6), live reviews (5), retrospectives (4), sleeve notes (3), comments (2), profiles (2), overviews (1).

Table 3
Information on publication and text types.

3.3. Speech and thought presentation (ST&P)

Speech and thought as stylistic categories were first analyzed by Leech and Short (1981) in literary works, then refined and expanded by Semino and Short (2004), who also accounted for non-fiction, such as newspaper writing. Both models are based on a representation scale, which compares and measures the effects caused by stylistic features on the reader.

Speech presentation provides insight into the creative strategies Bangs used to construct his literary personas. As explored in Section 4, his idiosyncratic use of free direct speech (FDS) is central to persona creation. Bangs often mimicked the characteristics of spoken language in his texts, giving his writings a spontaneous and free-flowing edge. Meanwhile, thought presentation provides insight into the (more implicit) self-reflective nature of the author and effectively pinpoints his perspectives on music and culture.

Table 4, adapted from McIntyre (2015, p. 64) shows and exemplifies the descriptors used in this investigation:

S&TP descriptors used in the investigation		
Category	**Descriptor**	**Speech and thought presentation example**
FD[S/T]	Free direct speech/thought	I'm exhausted!
D[S/T]	Direct speech/thought	He said/thought, "I'm exhausted!"
FI[S/T]	Free indirect speech/thought	He was exhausted

Table 4
Corpus stylistics descriptors used for the linguistic analysis.

3.4. Annotation and analysis

The descriptors in Table 4 represent a "complex and relatively 'high-level' discoursal phenomenon" (Semino and Short 2004, p. 26). For this reason, the researchers developed their own corpus annotation system. It consists of ad hoc text markup conventions corresponding to different stylistic presentation categories. Stylistic annotation, however, is riddled with ambiguities that can lead to uncertainties in the use of descriptors (see Semino and Short 2004, pp. 182-98). This necessitates multiple re-checks of text-internal mark-up, which can be time-consuming.

CATMA 7.1 (Meister 2023) was used to mitigate this issue. This online software is based on text-external markup. After creating a customized tagset, the corpus was annotated with text-external markup. The annotations

are not embedded in texts but saved in an external database, allowing quick and accurate corrections when necessary. Customized tags corresponding to the descriptors were created first (Annex 1), then the corpus was annotated. CATMA's interface prioritizes user-friendliness: text-external markup is rendered by underlining selected stretches of text (Annex 2).

The stretches of text corresponding to the investigated S&TP categories were saved in different Excel files corresponding to each S&TP category. This allowed the total number of tokens for each descriptor and the mean length of the annotations to be calculated. The annotations were subsequently analyzed with the KWIC (key words in context) function on CATMA, which displayed the concordance lines associated with a specific tag (see Annex 3 for an example). The concordances were analyzed with an unstructured, bottom-up process "whereby the researcher eyeballs the concordance lines and lets that qualitative holistic judgement form the basis of analysis (Gillings and Mautner 2023, p. 41).

3.5. Limitations

One of this study's limitations concerns researcher bias, since the linguistic investigation was carried out by a single researcher, differently from Semino and Short (2004), which is based on inter-annotator agreement (Artstein 2017), a widely used measure for ensuring annotation reliability.

Some measures were taken to mitigate this issue. This study follows an expert annotator approach (cf. Mahlberg 2013), where a single researcher, familiar with the theoretical framework of the paper, annotates the corpus. This approach aligns with corpus stylistics, which implies manual annotation based on linguistic interpretation (cf. Semino and Short 2004). Given the difficulties encountered with Bangs's writing, manual annotation is necessary, since there are no automated tools specifically meant for corpus stylistics tagging. Furthermore, to attenuate potential subjectivity and errors, annotations were double-checked, and ambiguous cases were marked for later re-assessment. This process can improve reliability despite the absence of other annotators, even though it does not eliminate researcher bias entirely. To make the annotation process manageable for a single researcher, only 8 S&TP categories were investigated. The selection of fewer descriptors was also aimed at strengthening consistency and precision in revisiting annotations.

Limitations were also encountered during corpus building, particularly concerning text distribution and editor bias. The corpus is skewed toward album reviews (Table 3). Despite attempting to collect a more diverse range of texts, the limited available material led to an overrepresentation of album reviews (35 out of 68 texts). This can be connected to Bangs's prolific output in this genre, especially in his first years as a critic (cf. DeRogatis 2001), or to

the limitations of *rocksbackpages.com* as an online archive. The name of the Lester Bangs's webpage editor is unknown, thus making it difficult to exactly pinpoint the incidence of editorial bias, as no information on the selection criteria can be found on the website. Furthermore, a perfectly balanced corpus across text types would have required significant culling. This procedure would have reduced the dataset size, thereby weakening the reliability of the quantitative analysis.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Distribution of descriptors in the corpus

Most frequent ST&P annotations in the corpus				
Descriptor	**Number of annotations**	**Percentage**	**Total number of tokens**	**Mean length of annotations (tokens)**
Free Direct Speech (FDS)	176	28,85%	6061	34.43
Free Indirect Thought (FIT)	135	22,13%	4170	30.88
Direct Speech (DS)	124	20,32%	5931	47.83
Indirect Thought (IT)	113	18,52%	2569	22.73
Indirect Speech (IS)	44	7,21%	1029	23.29
Free Indirect Speech (FIS)	11	1,80%	221	20.09
Direct Thought (DT)	4	0,65%	65	16.25
Free Direct Thought (FDT)	3	0,49%	66	22
Total	**610**	**100%**	**20112**	**27.18**

Table 5
Most frequent ST&P descriptors in the corpus.

Table 5 reveals interesting frequency patterns. FDS (28,85%) is more frequent than DS (22,13%), contradicting Semino and Short's observation that "the DS tag is more than twice as frequent as the FDS tag" in their corpus (2004, p. 90). This anomaly might have different explanations. First, Bangs tends to report lyrics verbatim in album reviews. using quotation marks. In these excerpts, he does not use reporting verbs, neither does he

specify the name of the singer (Excerpt 1):

> They romp in and play in 'Brothers Together' along the glens and knolls and shady groves "where nature is the greatest thing and the power of beauty is an everyday thing". (Bangs 1972)

Similarly, Bangs does not frequently use reporting clauses in interviews, presumably to create a less mechanical narration. The bolded part in Excerpt 2 shows a rapid verbal exchange between Bangs and Lou Reed, rendered with free direct speech.

> Then he takes another glug and machos: "I'm outdrinking you two to one, you know." "Are you proud of yourself?". "Yeah. No, not actually; it's just that a single shot of Scotch is so small that you've gotta nurse it like it's a child or something. I drink constantly". (Bangs 1973)

Perhaps the most interesting pattern, however, is the author's use of ambiguous free direct speech. These instances were at times difficult to distinguish from other S&TP categories, such as FIT and FIS. The key role of this stylistic feature in the creation of Bangs's personas is detailed in 4.2.

The frequent use of FIT and IT is less surprising. The first is commonly used in fiction to explore the narrator's and characters' inner thoughts. Bangs's employment of literary devices in his texts reflects his influences from fiction and Beat prose. Similarly, IT clarifies the narrator's positioning, crucial for music criticism's evaluative nature. While arguably less inventive—since it requires a reporting clause containing a stative verb of thought—IT is an effective window into Bangs's thought-provoking opinions.

FDS, FIT and IT best represent Bangs's idiosyncratic style. Their salient characteristics are explored in the following subsection.

4.2. Formally ambiguous Free Direct Speech (FDS): Bangs's stylistic trademark

FDS is the most frequent descriptor in the corpus. Bangs used FDS to create personas who manifested specific behaviors and beliefs. He crafted these authorial voices by writing long portions of text that mimicked people engaged in monologues and conversations (Excerpts 3 and 4).

> There's not too many of those greasy rockers still hanging around from their '50s heydaze good for much more than playing 50 tank towns a year, making asses of themselves on TV talk shows or singing 'Dixie', but I'm pretty sure we can trust Jerry Lee Lewis. (Bangs 1972)

> Remember the scene in Lina Wertmuller's SEVEN BEAUTIES where the concentration camp inmate commits suicide by swandiving into a vat of festeringly clotted human excrement approximatively the length and depth of Troy's Donahue pool at the La Cienega he owed in the summer of 1963? And all because he would rather drown lungs full of shit than endure one moment of this travesty posing as existence. Well, that's how John L§d§n told me he felt after hearing this new LP by The Mekons. (Bangs 1982)

Excerpt 3 includes colloquial, denigratory expressions associated with spoken language ("making asses of themselves," "tank towns") and the use of the first-person plural pronoun "we," which involves both the persona and the reader. Excerpt 4 presents imagery aimed at provoking disgust and directly addresses the reader ("Remember[…]?"). Excerpt 4 is also syntactically complex, presenting several coordinate and subordinate phrases.

Excerpts 3 and 4 were annotated with the FDS tag since they omit the reporting clause and emulate spoken language. Nonetheless, Semino and Short argue that FDS "usually involves the presence of quotation marks" (2004, p. 92). Furthermore, they state that FDS is commonly found in "long stretches of conversation [that] make it difficult for readers to keep track of the identity of the speakers" (ibid., p. 92). Although not featuring inverted commas, the reader perceives a single narrative voice. We may not know the identity of the persona, but the writer unmistakably presents a single person's utterance.

These features may cause confusion with FIS. FIS blends the characteristics of DS and IS (Semino and Short 2004). It does not require quotation marks, and the text sequences resemble spoken language, aligning with the characteristics in Excerpts 3 and 4. However, FIS is associated with a narrator reporting on the speech of others. For this reason, this category normally features the past tense because the narrator reports speech after it is uttered. Excerpts 3 and 4 portray "synchronic" spoken material, and Bangs identifies himself with the narrator persona.

Excerpts 3 and 4 might be considered Bangs's thoughts on Jerry Lee Lewis and The Mekons, thus likely to be categorized as thought presentation stretches, like FDT and FIT. Nonetheless, FDT is accompanied by a stative verb representing thought, while FIT is usually presented with long stretches of text in the past tense, where the relationship between speech and thought remains latent (Cohn 1978). Excerpts 3 and 4 do not involve thought verbs, hinting, on the contrary, at spoken material. Consequently, they adhere better to the FDS category.

Bangs's idiosyncratic FDS sequences provide answers to the first and second research questions (3.1.). FDS appears to be Bangs's preferred strategy to create personas in his texts. The manipulation of this stylistic feature hints at two constants in Bangs's production: the creation of personas and the subjective first-person immersion advocated by *New Journalism*. He

did so by concealing himself behind personas. Bangs could be the contrarian, denouncing the commodification of rock 'n' roll (Excerpt 3), or the boisterous music critic, who was not afraid to use squalid imagery (Excerpt 4).

FDS also provides insight into Bangs's discourses about music and culture. The author condemned rock and punk's loss of edge, adopting the harsh or self-deprecating critic persona. Simultaneously, he acted as an enthusiastic, lewd fan when he liked a band. The following excerpts exemplify these different facets of Bangs's personas:

> But I digress. But I wonder if you know how easy it is to digress from a Captain and Tennille review. […] On the contrary, I'm so jaded from hearing 39 identical punk bands in a row (and I even buy 'em! Imports!) that I'm predisposed – let's face it, I WANT – to like the Captain and Tennille. (Bangs 1977)

> Don't let anybody tell you, ever again, that rock and roll is people's music – rock and roll is $8,50 a ticket for Bob Seger, and there is an elite, and so what? (Bangs 1976) – issued on *Creem*

> Also, I am sick of those guys' [the band Kiss] weltanschauung; they should stop singing about fucking, which is nobody else's business anyway, and get down to topical consciousness-raising a la Black Sabbath. (Bangs 1977)

> If you never like another San Francisco album after Moby Grape's first, I still guarantee that this album will tickle your synapses and convey all the unstrained intellectual excitement that any music should have.

> And if you've ever heard even one lick of Dave's guitar work you're sold on Foghat, because he's brilliant and he's passed it on to them. If you haven't heard Dave try this album anyway in which blues and rock fuck righteously enough to call for nuptials […] (Bangs 1972)

Excerpt 5 shows self-deprecating humor and sarcasm. The author is aware of the commodification of punk ("39 identical punk bands in a row") but does not seem capable of protesting it. Instead, he employs hyperbole and sarcasm to make fun of his own behavior ("I'm so jaded"; "and I even buy them!").

In Excerpt 6, Bangs complains about rising ticket prices for rock concerts, which became mainstream events in the 1970s (see Frith 1981). He does so by addressing the reader directly and frankly. As his colleague Robert

Christgau noted, Bangs wanted to keep "alive the dream of insurrectionary rock and roll" (1982).

His criticism of Kiss (Excerpt 7) reflects Bangs's ideals. He negatively evaluates Kiss's lyrics about sex using a colloquial expression ("I am sick of those guys") while advocating for more consciousness-raising rock music, citing the band Black Sabbath as an example.

Excerpts 8 and 9 show two different sides of Bangs's enthusiastic evaluations, linked by a personal and subjective tone. In Excerpt 8, he merges high and low registers ("tickle your synapses," "convey all the unstrained intellectual excitement that any music should have"). In contrast, he embodies the juvenile fan in Excerpt 9, offering a positive yet smutty evaluation of Foghat ("in which blues and rock fuck righteously enough to call for nuptials").

FDS can thus be considered the main strategy that Bangs used to craft his literary personas. The colloquial register seen throughout the excerpts, together with the spontaneous, free-flowing, and unfiltered use of language, made the articles seem earnest and trustworthy. These characteristics allowed readers to identify with the author, making them more likely to agree with Bangs's opinions on music and culture. Table 6 exemplifies the *persona* types found in these excerpts:

Persona types	
Type	**Excerpt**
Disillusioned critic	3, 5, 6
Lewd provocateur	4
Lewd contrarian	7
Enthusiastic, juvenile fan	8, 9

Table 6
Types of *personas* enacted by Lester Bangs.

4.3. Bangs's discourses about music through (Free) Indirect Thought

As discussed in 4.2., it was sometimes difficult to discern FDS from FIT, since they present similarities in the corpus. Considering this, there are two main distinctive features in Bangs's FIT sequences. In his essays and reviews, he sometimes adopts the point of view of the artists under scrutiny, picturing their inner thoughts. In addition, depending on contextual information, Bangs's personas shift their focus to inward reflection. This latter strategy can be followed by IT, which demonstrates how Bangs reflected on the discourses surrounding the music he listened to. The following excerpts exemplify these strategies:

> By now she was writing a body of originals; she'd never again have to endure the all but hopeless search for other composers attuned to her ethos. (Bangs 1971)

> I'm not trying to denigrate Alice Cooper's abilities: within the context of their self-imposed limitations, the album is listenable. But there is a way to do these things. I think simplicity and the imaginative use of the cliché are at the essence of rock; but the cliches have to hit you in a certain way […] to spark that certain internal combustion of good feeling and galvanized energies. (Bangs 1969)

Excerpt 10 starts with a presentation of writing. Even though the stylistic category is not relevant to the investigation, it effectively sets the scene: Bangs pictured the German songwriter *Nico* during her creative process. After the semicolon, the author imagines how she felt at the time, using FIT. Notwithstanding the absence of a reporting clause, the reader gets an idea of Nico's perceived sense of freedom after the "all-but-hopeless search" she endured when recording her previous albums. Bangs here acts as an omniscient, extradiegetic narrator (Genette 1980) who is aware of the events and feelings in the character's life (i.e., Nico). Put differently, Bangs sets his persona aside to let Nico express her feelings. In addition, Excerpt 10 is in the past tense, one of the key features of FIT according to Semino and Short.

Although a more ambiguous FIT sequence, Excerpt 11 provides further insight into Bangs's discourses on rock music. Instead of emulating a conversation with the reader, Bangs self-evaluates his opinion of *Alice Cooper* ("I'm not trying to denigrate Alice Cooper's abilities"). This might be considered FIT. Bangs states something he thinks, and no reporting clause is used. The sentence is in the present tense because Bangs reports the thoughts of the narrator/journalist as they happen. The stative nature of this excerpt is made clearer with the third sentence, which clearly features IT. It starts with a reporting clause ("I think") and explicitly contains the author's opinion on rock music.

From a discursive standpoint, Excerpt 11 is particularly interesting. It was published in 1969, when Bangs had just started writing for *Rolling Stone*. Two clear sides to his persona can be seen. The first is the reflective yet opinionated critic, who expresses his contrasting feelings on rock music. Bangs would further develop this narrative voice in his *Village Voice* articles. Furthermore, good rock music is represented as a genre that involves "good feeling and galvanized energy" in this excerpt. This once again proves that, for Lester Bangs, grit and honesty were the core of all rock 'n' roll (Jones and Featherly 2002), and he would defend this view up until his death in 1982.

5. Concluding remarks

This paper analyzed and contextualized the stylistic and discursive features of Lester Bangs's production, shedding light on his literary personas. The research questions were centered on seven S&TP categories.

Bangs frequently employed FDS, a thought-provoking finding that differs from Semino and Short's analysis. The author used FDS to report lyrics and exchanges in interviews with quotation marks. However, he also manipulated this presentation category to create his personas. By directly addressing the reader and deploying features of spoken language, Bangs mimics the self-loathing provocateur, the reflective critic, and the immature yet overtly enthusiastic fan.

His explicit attitude is counterbalanced by his use of FIT and IT, which give the reader insight into Lester Bangs's thoughts. Bangs also uses FIT to craft quasi-literary narrations, in which he portrays an omniscient, extradiegetic narrator. His rendition of Nico's creative process, his somewhat composed reflection on Alice Cooper, and his remarks on the value of good rock music emphasize his authorial complexities. While enthusiastic and chaotic at times, Bangs's writing was passionate and eloquent.

The stylistic features found in Chapter 4 are a consequence of Bangs's literary and journalistic influences. Subjectivity, first-person immersion, and seamless shifts in register were inspired by Tom Wolfe's *New Journalism*; the "musical" vitality and provocative edge of his texts were inspired by *Beat* prose, particularly Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs.

This paper aims to enrich the understanding of Lester Bangs as a pivotal author in the music press, an understudied topic that has been gaining attention in cultural studies and linguistics in recent years (e.g., Grafe and McKeown 2024). However, many of Lester Bangs's idiosyncrasies as a writer must still be unearthed. Further insight can be gained into the presentation of writing to investigate how Bangs relates to the activity he devoted himself to until his premature death. Additionally, the author tried to bridge the gap between writing and music by representing sounds in his writings. Analyzing this aspect can provide further insight into the narrator's representation of voice. Writing about sounds might involve a broad range of stylistic and rhetorical strategies, which could further enrich the discussion on the use of corpus stylistics.

Popular music creates powerful discourses (Van Leeuwen 2012). Music journalists address them, providing insightful commentary. Therefore, they create discourses about musical discourse, which are not only aesthetic, but also ideological in nature, given the prominent cultural relevance of popular music in Western society (Tagg 1982). Furthermore, this understudied area offers the opportunity to employ interdisciplinary approaches based on applied linguistics, cultural and media studies, and

musicology.

Bangs's tragic fate and his multifaceted writings offer valuable insight into these types of discourse, which shaped contemporary music, as well as portraying music journalism as a unique, genre-defying writing style.

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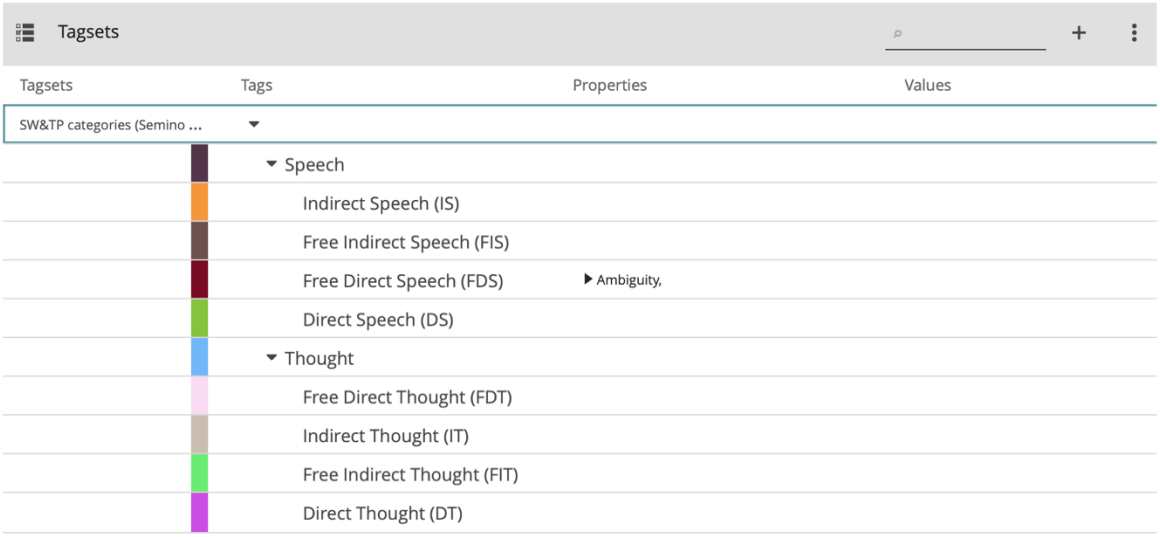
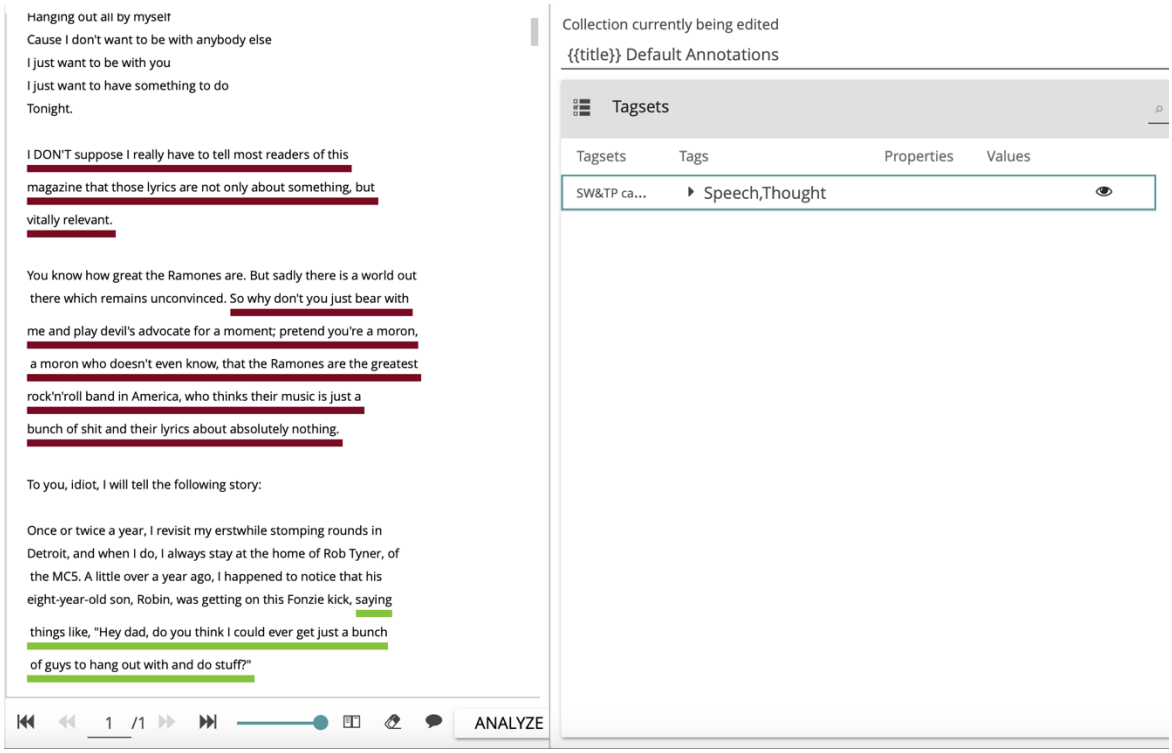
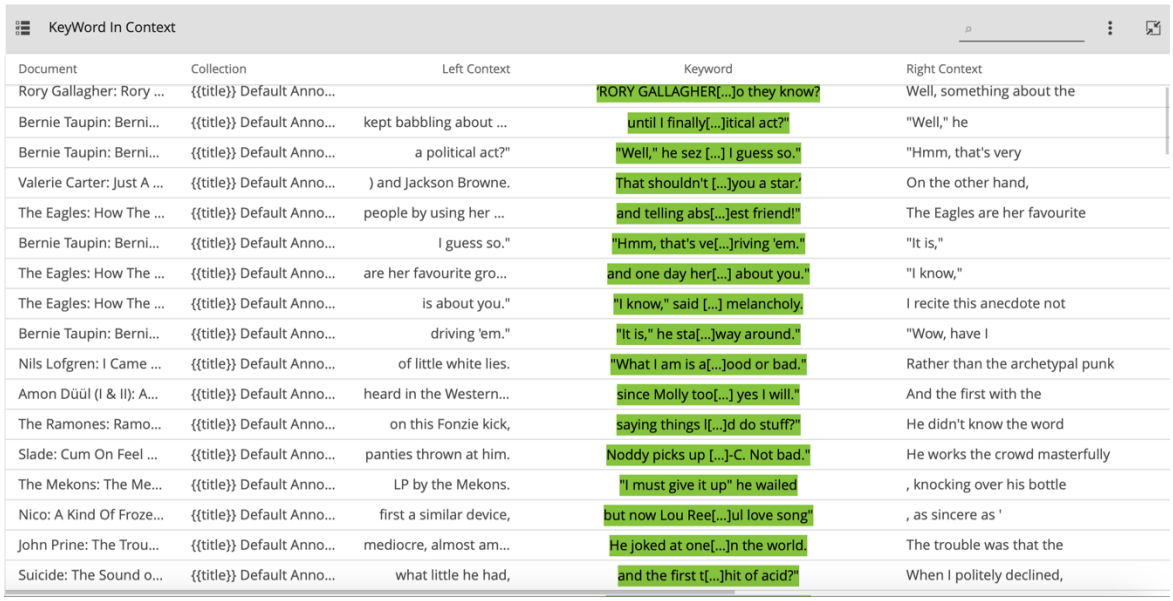
Annexes



Annex 1
Tagsets used in CATMA 7.1.



Annex 2
Annotation interface in CATMA 7.1.



KeyWord In Context

Document	Collection	Left Context	Keyword	Right Context
Rory Gallagher: Rory ...	{{title}} Default Anno...		'RORY GALLAGHER[...]o they know?	Well, something about the
Bernie Taupin: Berni...	{{title}} Default Anno...	kept babbling about ...	until I finally[...]itical act?"	"Well," he
Bernie Taupin: Berni...	{{title}} Default Anno...	a political act?"	"Well," he sez [...] I guess so."	"Hmm, that's very
Valerie Carter: Just A ...	{{title}} Default Anno...	) and Jackson Browne.	That shouldn't [...]you a star.'	On the other hand,
The Eagles: How The ...	{{title}} Default Anno...	people by using her ...	and telling abs[...]est friend!"	The Eagles are her favourite
Bernie Taupin: Berni...	{{title}} Default Anno...	I guess so."	"Hmm, that's ve[...]riving 'em."	"It is,"
The Eagles: How The ...	{{title}} Default Anno...	are her favourite gro...	and one day her[...] about you."	"I know,"
The Eagles: How The ...	{{title}} Default Anno...	is about you."	"I know," said [...] melancholy.	I recite this anecdote not
Bernie Taupin: Berni...	{{title}} Default Anno...	driving 'em."	"It is," he sta[...]way around."	"Wow, have I
Nils Lofgren: I Came ...	{{title}} Default Anno...	of little white lies.	"What I am is a[...]ood or bad."	Rather than the archetypal punk
Amon Düül (I & II): A...	{{title}} Default Anno...	heard in the Western...	since Molly too[...] yes I will."	And the first with the
The Ramones: Ramo...	{{title}} Default Anno...	on this Fonzie kick,	saying things I[...]d do stuff?"	He didn't know the word
Slade: Cum On Feel ...	{{title}} Default Anno...	panties thrown at him.	Noddy picks up [...]-C. Not bad."	He works the crowd masterfully
The Mekons: The Me...	{{title}} Default Anno...	LP by the Mekons.	"I must give it up" he wailed	, knocking over his bottle
Nico: A Kind Of Froze...	{{title}} Default Anno...	first a similar device,	but now Lou Ree[...]ul love song"	, as sincere as '
John Prine: The Trou...	{{title}} Default Anno...	mediocre, almost am...	He joked at one[...]n the world.	The trouble was that the
Suicide: The Sound o...	{{title}} Default Anno...	what little he had,	and the first t[...]hit of acid?"	When I politely declined,

Annex 3
Direct Speech (DS) concordance lines on CATMA 7.1.

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"I REMEMBER WHEN THE BEATLES CAME" A Corpus-Assisted Discourse Study of Women's Musical Oral Histories

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Abstract – Combining corpus linguistics and discourse analysis, this article examines the language used by American women of the Boomer generation to describe what it meant to listen to rock music in the late 1960s and 1970s. Drawing on their first-hand accounts, the study focuses on the realisation of stance through which participants construct meaning and negotiate their positioning within a historically male-dominated cultural space. The findings reveal that they employ emotionally rich and evaluative language to express personal investment and informed appreciation. This stance taking not only shapes their musical experiences but also serves as a means of resisting dominant, often stereotypical, models of fandom by foregrounding reflective, critical, and culturally significant forms of engagement. The study further demonstrates that incorporating corpus methods into oral history research can uncover specific linguistic patterns that might remain unnoticed in purely qualitative analyses. The article is relevant to the field of linguistics and may also be of interest to scholars in cultural studies, music studies, and memory studies.

Keywords: Corpus-assisted discourse studies; memory studies; musical discourse; oral history; stance.

1. Background and Aims

Popular music consumption is a significant site for processes of identification, affiliation, and belonging (Southerton 2011, p. 1). These processes extend beyond listening to include the ways individuals make sense of music through the stories they tell about it. From recalling formative years to expressing ideational affiliation, discourse *about* music not only reconstructs particular (private) accounts of personal experiences but also serves as a means of negotiating individuals' inclusion within specific social and cultural spaces and heritage configurations (Frith 1996; Connell and Gibson 2003; Lipsitz 1990; van Dijck 2006).

The intersection of music, (cultural) memory, and identity has been explored across a range of academic disciplines, including popular music studies, sociology and psychology (Bennett and Rogers 2016; Garrido and Davidson 2019), providing valuable insights into how individuals and communities construct, negotiate, and sustain their sense of self through

musical engagement. The complex relationship between music consumption, individual and collective identity formation operates through multiple mechanisms, from deeply personal emotional connections to broader social and cultural affiliations (Frith 1996).

The capacity of music to encode memories with emotional significance has been highlighted as a central feature in the creation of lasting associations between particular songs or musical experiences and key life events, be it a childhood memory, a significant relationship, or a pivotal event (DeNora 2000; Lippman and Greenwood 2012). For example, the music of one's formative years frequently becomes intertwined with personal narratives of growth, change, and self-discovery, creating musical biographical trajectories (Gramit 2016).

Musical identity extends beyond the individual engagement encompassing broader social and cultural dimensions, including affiliations, cultural values, gender and generational markers (MacDonald *et al.* 2002). Through shared musical experiences, people forge connections with others, but also enact agency and reclaim power, costructing their own discourses of "resistance, subversion, belonging, community, and hope" (Way *et al*. 2017, xv). For instance, rock music is commonly linked to forms of rebellion against traditional and conservative cultures (Moore and Carr 2020), while punk is frequently associated with class conflict (Leichtman 2010).

For all these reasons, music should be approached as a form of discourse, consistent with van Leeuwen's (2012, p. 319) argument that it is "an integral part of social, political and economic life" and a medium through which emotive allegiance is formed. The linguistic analysis of musical discourse can be a fruitful avenue through which to examine processes of perception and evaluation of the musical product (Aleshinskaya 2013). In line with this, and in the application of this theoretical perspective, this article examines lay discourse on music, drawing on audio-recorded interview data from American women of the Boomer generation. The questions to be answered are, thus, how participants describe the music-related practices they experienced and witnessed and account for their personal actions and opinions. Particularly, the analysis of a set of interviews, conducted in person and via digital platforms, aims at revealing how the participants discursively construct their musical preferences and recollections of key music consumption practices in late 1960s and 1970s New York City. The collected female-centred narratives are analysed through a corpus-assisted discourse analysis approach (Baker *et al*. 2008; Baker 2023; Partington *et al*. 2013). This mixed-method may prove particularly fruitful as the corpus processes can uncover linguistic patterns, which can then be analysed qualitatively (Biber *et al.* 1998; Friginal and Hardy 2013). This study focuses particularly on stance-making resources (Biber 2004) women employ to articulate musical experience and align with—or resist—prevailing narratives within a

cultural domain historically shaped by male dominance. It also intends to make a contribution to the enhancement of corpus methods in the study of inteview data, understood as repositories of both personal and collective memory (Fitzgerald 2022; Fitzgerald and Timmis 2024).

To consider women's participation in rock music culture, it is important to acknowledge both persistent representational gaps and the enduring influence of gendered stereotypes. In this regard, Bennett (2015, p. 20) argues that "the late 20th century popular music heritage is largely dictated through an Anglo-American axis of influence as a heritage project that is essentially white, middle class, middle aged and rockist." He further contends that this narrow framing has significant consequences, as it excludes "vast tracts of musical production, perfomance and reception from memory" (see also Connell and Gibson 2003, p. 4; Johnson 2013, pp. 96-97; 2018, p. 16).

Popular music female fandom has been explored across various academic disciplines. However, within music studies, this area has often been examined through relatively narrow frameworks, interpreting women's engagement with pop/rock music primarily through the lens of star-centred hysteria (e.g. Cline 1992; Ehrenreich *et al*. 1992; Larsen 2017; Lewis 1992). Such interpretations have effectively excluded women from serious consideration as discerning music consumers. Within the ongoing "masculinization" (Feldman-Barrett 2021, p. 5) of rock music discourse, their experiences have been often reduced to stereotypical representations of emotional excess or uncritical devotion.

More recent scholarship (Berman 2007; Bumsted 2024; Feldman-Barrett 2021; Hill 2016; Mangione and Luff 2017; Rhodes 2005) has begun to challenge these reductive perspectives found both in previous research as well as in media representations, while giving prominence to the voices of female fans. For instance, Rhodes (2005) devotes considerable attention to the rising phenomenom of the 'groupie' in the late 1960s and 1970s. Notably, this derisive term was used to refer to a particular kind of female fan commonly portrayed as being more interested in pursuing sexual relationships with rock musicians than in engaging with their music (see also Cohen 2013). Drawing on a range of sources, Rhodes examines the diverse, creative, and meaningful roles women have played in popular music—roles that have often been obscured by sexist narratives perpetuated by predominantly white, male music critics. These critics, lacking a nuanced understanding of women's engagement in rock culture, have historically held the power to determine which stories are told and remembered. In a now-infamous *New Statesman* essay, Paul Johnson derided Beatles female fans with open contempt: "Those who flock round the Beatles, who scream themselves into hysteria, whose vacant faces flicker over the TV screen, are the least fortunate of their generation, the dull, the idle, the failures" (quoted

in Ewens 2020, p. 15). Teenage girl fans have long been subject to such patronising portrayals in the press, and, as Grant notes, they are often perceived as "a mindless horde: one huge, undifferentiated emerging hormone" (quoted in Mills 2019, p. 207). This reductive historiography has been more recently challenged by Feldman-Barrett (2021) who examines first-hand accounts from Beatles' women fans revealing the expertise, discernment, and reflective engagement that have long characterised the band female fan base—well beyond the familiar tropes of 'hysterical' affect and consumerist behaviour.

Despite these significant contributions, the history of women's music reception remains under-documented and under-analysed, especially with regard to its discursive and linguistic dimensions. While existing research has extensively explored the social, cultural, and emotional aspects of women's engagement with music, relatively little attention has been devoted to the language women use to talk about (rock) music. This study therefore aims to fill a crucial gap in the literature.

To establish the theoretical and methodological frameworks, the article begins with a short introduction to the field of oral history, followed by an overview of previous linguistic research analysing oral history data. Subsequent to this foundation, the integration of corpus linguistics methods in oral history research will be outlined. The corpus design and analytical procedures employed in this study will then be described in detail. A considerable amount of space within this article is bound up with the discussion of the findings. The study concludes by identifying potential academic routes for future research at the intersection of corpus linguistics and oral history.

2. Oral History and Corpus Linguistics

Oral history is a research methodology that involves collecting and analysing spoken data, focusing on individuals' experiences, historical events, and cultural practices (e.g. Perks and Thomson 2016). While these testimonies serve as essential repositories for studying social lives, sensitive subjects, and significant events, their scope extends far beyond documenting narratives of trauma and conflict. Oral history is a research tool with virtually unlimited applications that equally values recovering neglected histories that are often absent, marginalised or unrecorded (Gluck and Patai 1991). As noted by Perks and Thomson (2015, p. 6), interviews with social and political elites have traditionally offered important insights alongside existing documentary sources. However, the greatest contribution of oral history lies in its capacity to document the experiences and perspectives of underrepresented communities and ordinary people who might otherwise have remained

"hidden from history." Present-day oral history is primarily seen as a way for individuals to tell their own life stories rather than as a method for collecting objective data in a structured, survey-like manner. As Grele argues, there has been "a shift from concern with data to concern with text" (cited in Summerfield 2016, p. 2). Contemporary research now prioritises the ways in which individuals construct and articulate their personal histories, rather than solely emphasising the factual content of their narratives.

In this regard, oral history functions as a versatile research method employed across a range of academic disciplines, each with its unique emphasis on either 'data' or 'text.' In the field of linguistic research, there has been an increasing interest in the examination of oral history data, recognising its potential to illuminate various aspects of language use across diverse areas of study (Roller 2015) such as applied linguistics (e.g. Pavlenko 2007; Schiffrin 2003), dialectology and sociolinguistics (e.g. Braber and Davies 2016; Denis 2016), as well as critical discourse studies (e.g. De Fina 2003; De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2015). This interest extends to both existing oral history collections and the development of new ones to support research in these fields.

The potential of corpus-based methods in oral history research is gaining growing recognition (Fitzgerald 2022; Fitzgerald and Timmis 2024). By providing a methodologically rigorous framework for data analysis, the integration of corpus techniques enhances the depth and consistency of linguistic investigations. Corpus processes, including keywords, collocations, and concordances, allow for the identification of recurring linguistic patterns across multiple oral history interviews, enabling a more systematic exploration of the language under examination. This approach not only offers a broader, quantitative-based perspective but also introduces a level of objectivity and replicability that is often difficult to achieve with traditional qualitative approaches. As a result, corpus linguistics helps to detect linguistic phenomena that might otherwise go unnoticed, enriching our understanding of how language reflects personal narratives, social dynamics, and historical contexts.

Corpus linguistics and oral history have been integrated in previous research, as outlined in Fitzgerald's (2022) comprehensive literature review. For instance, one earlier example of such methodological orientation is Sealey's (2010) study of the Millennibum Project, which is based on 144 interviews from individuals living in Birmingham in 2001. Applying corpus linguistics techniques, Sealey examined the dataset to identify discourse patterns and explore self-representation strategies. In a subsequent study using the same corpus, she analysed concordances of the phrase "I couldn't" to investigate the constraints on speakers' communicative goals (Sealey 2012). Another significant and more recent illustration of the intersection between corpus linguistics and oral history is Fitzgerald's latest study (2022),

which explores the linguistic construction of certainty. For this research, Fitzgerald compiled a corpus from the History Archive at the Irish Bureau of Military History. His study aimed to show what it may be obtained by combining corpus tools and competencies with oral history sources, addressing what Schiffrin (2003, p. 84) describes as a "dearth of linguistic analyses of oral histories."

The blending of corpus linguistics and oral history should also take into consideration the ethical concerns that arise when working with personal narratives and memory-based discourse (Fitzgerald and Timmis 2024). On the one hand, scholars face the challenge of preserving the authenticity and uniqueness of individual voices, ensuring that personal testimonies are not diluted or misrepresented in broader analyses. On the other hand, ethical considerations extend to issues of consent, privacy, and the complex interplay between public and private domains (Brookes and McEnery 2024). Participants may share deeply personal reflections, sometimes without full awareness of how their narratives might be used or interpreted in academic works. Other challenges are posed by the nature of spoken language itself. Oral histories are often characterised by non-standard varieties, incomplete sentences, lexical repetitions, hesitations, all of which complicate the process of transcribing and coding spoken data for corpus analysis. Furthermore, due to the complexity of retrieving spoken data, the size of oral history corpora is often much smaller than those typically used in corpus linguistics, which are more often based on vast collections of written data. Nevertheless, advances in transcription technologies and the increasing availability of digitised oral history collections are making it more feasible to compile and analyse oral history data.

3. Data and Methods

For the present study, interviews are proposed as both the data collection tool and as an object of analysis being an "efficient means of eliciting 'talk on topic'" (Nikander 2012, p. 400). This section presents the participants, the data and methodology used to analyse the linguistic articulation of rock music engagement among female fans from the Boomer generation. More specifically, Section 3.1 details the recruitment context and participant profiles, Section 3.2 describes the interview format adopted for this study, Section 3.3 presents the corpus and Section 3.4 outlines the analytical approach.

3.1. Participants

In this research, New York City was selected as the study site for its enduring significance in modern music history and its continued role as a focal point for the social and cultural value of music (Baker 2019). The data collection was carried out by the author between September 2019 and March 2020. The timing proved particularly fruitful, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the Woodstock Music & Art Fair, that was held August 15-18, 1969, in Bethel, New York. Woodstock is regarded as one of the pivotal moments in popular music history and 1960s counterculture. The anniversary served as a catalyst for a wide array of commemorative events and "heritage rock" (Bennett 2009, p. 478) projects, such as concerts, exhibitions, and public gatherings that celebrated the festival lasting impact on music and countercultural movements.

These events not only rekindled public interest in the festival's legacy but also provided unique opportunities for participant recruitment among members of the Boomer generation, comprising those born between 1946 and 1964, came of age alongside the rise of rock music and have since engaged with its shifting cultural and social meanings across the decades. More specifically, prospective female participants were approached during various events, including the Woodstock 50th Anniversary celebration at Morrison Hotel Gallery on August 9, 2019 (attended by Woodstock co-founder Michael Lang and official photographer Henry Diltz), and concerts featuring artists such as Arlo Guthrie, Joan Baez, Bob Weir (The Grateful Dead), and David Crosby (Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young). Additional recruitment occurred at performances by other influential figures, including Patti Smith, The Eagles, and The Rolling Stones. Within this context, a purposive sampling strategy (Bryman 2008) was employed to recruit participants, ensuring the collection of rich, experiential data grounded in their active involvement in the local music scene during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. The participant network expanded through snowball sampling (Noy 2008), as existing contacts facilitated connections with additional qualified speakers. All individuals were subsequently contacted personally, with interview arrangements finalised via email. The final sample comprised 16 women aged 63–71 at the time of the interview, from diverse backgrounds, including both white and non-white educated female participants, all of whom had spent significant portions of their young and adult life in New York City. This diversity ensured representation across a range of socioeconomic contexts within the chosen urban setting, while maintaining the focus on women from the Boomer generation with a strong connection to the city. The participants responded to the interview questions with varying degrees of detail. Accordingly, the length of the interviews differed, ranging from 40 to 65 minutes. The encounters took place in

participants' homes, in public spaces, or via online platforms (e.g., Skype). It is important to point out that, from a discourse analytic perspective, participants are not treated as directly representative of a demographic category in the way that statistical research typically assumes. Instead, the aim is to compile a sufficiently large corpus to identify recurring discursive patterns for a more detailed examination (Nikander 2012, p. 404).

Although the content of the interviews was not inherently sensitive, participants were still provided with detailed information about the study's objectives, methodologies, and potential implications, ensuring transparency in data collection and analysis. To mitigate the potential risks associated with the retrospective nature of memory-based discourse, ethical considerations were taken into account, particularly with regard to informed consent, data anonymisation and interpretation.

3.2. The Narrative Interview

The narratives of personal experiences that form the focus of this work can be characterised as "interactional events" (De Fina 2009, p. 237) and have been conceptualised within the (often oral) 'life stories' research tradition (De Fina 2003), drawing on the idea of 'counter-narrativity' (Bamberg and Andrews 2004) in relation to the prevailing cultural construction of female fandom. Through life-story elicitation questions, such as "Can you tell me about the first concert you ever been to?," participants were encouraged to recount specific experiences and anecdotes. During the interview, the interviewer engaged with speakers by demonstrating active listening and occasionally commenting briefly on their responses, similar to the dynamics of natural conversation:

> 1. Interviewer: Alright, let's go back a bit—can you tell me about the most memorable concert you've ever been to?
> 2. Speaker 1: First concert?
> 3. Interviewer: A concert that felt particularly special or memorable to you.
> 4. Speaker 1: Well, probably when my father took us to the Troubadour when we were 10 years old to listen to folk music back in the Sixties. And I got to go into a nightclub with my dad and we had folks and pretzels and it was like, Oh my God and then going back to the Troubadour as an adult, I flashed on that memory. It was, oh yeah, it was 50 years ago. So that was really memorable because of the, my first time in a, in a nightclub, I saw Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, old blues men like blues a lot, uhm, and he also took us to a concert […] like Gordon Lightfoot, which was a Canadian kinda […]
> 5. Interviewer: Yeah, I know him!
> 6. Speaker 1: We went, uh, my dad took us to my sister and I to Gordon Lightfoot concert at the Santa Monica Civic in the Seventies. So that was also very cool cause we were the big kids, you know, we were, I was probably 11 that time. So, uhm, then after that I said my musical path split from my dad and I went more into Rock.

This extract illustrates a moment of interactional negotiation, where the participant initially seeks clarification ("First concert?") in response to the interviewer's prompt. The interviewer then reformulates the question to better align with the participant's frame of reference, prompting a detailed and emotionally rich narrative. This process highlights the co-construction of meaning within the interview setting, as the participant moves from uncertainty to reflective storytelling. The interviewer's minimal yet supportive input ("Yeah, I know him!") further encourages elaboration, underscoring the conversational and collaborative nature of the data generation process.

Such interview format has been widely employed in discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and discursive psychology (e.g. De Fina 2003; Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann 2000; Sirhan 2014). In the case under observation, it proved particularly effective, as it fostered a comfortable and open environment that encouraged participants to share detailed, personal narratives, leading to deeper insights into their music-related lived experiences.

Regarding the interviewer's role in shaping the narrative and guiding the discussion, Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann (2000) argue that while interviewers are expected to remain attentive yet unobtrusive, they inevitably contribute to the conversation. Through verbal and non-verbal cues—such as backchannelling, maintaining eye contact, and providing feedback—they facilitate the continuation of the narrative. Furthermore, the structure and phrasing of their questions influence how participants frame and present their stories, thereby contributing to the overall meaning and flow of the conversation. Given the author's prior acquaintance with the participants, which was facilitated through previous informal encounters, the interviews naturally took on a conversational tone, making it intuitive to engage with and respond to the narrators when appropriate.

This type of semi-structured interviews facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' musical preferences, experiences, and perceptions of cultural authority, capturing a diverse range of perspectives. Questions addressed how participants define their musical tastes, the role of music in their personal and social lives, significant memories associated with particular songs, artists, or events, and their views on cultural authority in music, including the influence of media, peers, and specific genres.

3.3. Corpus

It is important to note that transcription is widely recognised as an interpretive act rather than a neutral or mechanical process. Far from being a mere facsimile of speech, a transcript constitutes a constructed representation

of spoken interaction, shaped by the researcher's theoretical lens and analytical aims (Braun and Clarke 2013, p. 239; Ochs 1979, p. 44). As Wengraf (2001, p. 130) notes, transcripts are better understood as "processed" data, reflecting the selective and purposeful nature of transcription decisions. Features such as prosody, emphasis, laughter, and other paralinguistic elements (e.g., throat-clearing) were not transcribed, as they were not deemed relevant to the aims of the present analysis. Transcription was conducted with the objective of producing data suitable for a corpus-based study, which has different requirements from conversation analysis (Braun and 2006, p. 17), a detailed verbatim account was considered adequate to retain the necessary information for interpretation. Transcription was carried out using the software *oTranscribe.*[1] However, prior to inclusion in the corpus, the transcripts underwent a cleaning and editing process to ensure suitability for analysis. This primarily involved removing sensitive and extraneous information, retaining only the interview content—both questions and responses. The final dataset comprises 65,504 words, drawn from a total of 16.3 hours stemming from 16 audio-recorded and orthographically transcribed interviews.

3.4. Corpus Methods

In this study, corpus linguistics is employed as a complementary approach alongside discourse studies methods (Baker *et al*. 2008; Baker 2023; Partington *et al*. 2013). Corpus linguistics facilitates empirical analysis of texts. In doing so it "draws conclusions from attested language use, rather than intuitions" (McEnery and Gabrielatos 2006, p. 34). To identify these linguistic patterns, the present analysis makes use of three techniques that have become established in corpus research; namely, keywords, collocation, and concordance analysis (Brookes and McEnery 2020), all of which are accessed via Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff *et al.* 2014).

To obtain the keyword list, the focus corpus was contrasted against the spoken component of the *Open American National Corpus* (OANC). The OANC was selected as a reference corpus for its broad coverage of general spoken American English data produced from 1990 onward, providing a comprehensive and representative baseline for contemporary language use. Its diverse range of spoken contexts ensures that the reference corpus captures common lexical patterns across various domains, making it an ideal comparison for identifying distinctive lexical features in the home corpus. This approach helps highlight significant lexical items specific to the narratives of American women, while minimising bias from any particular genre or topic. A minimum threshold of 5 occurrences was chosen due to the

[1] See: https://otranscribe.com.

relatively small size of the dataset. With a limited corpus, setting a higher threshold would eliminate too many potentially relevant items from consideration. Significance was calculated using log-likelihood, with an alpha of 0.0001.

After generating the keyword list, words were analysed in context and assigned to semantic fields. This qualitative classification process involved examining concordance lines for each keyword to understand its usage patterns and contextual meanings within the interviews. The categorisation framework was developed inductively from the data, with initial broad semantic domains being refined through multiple readings.

4. Results and Discussion

This section opens with a presentation of the keywords that form the basis of the current analysis. Then, attention will focus on a smaller set of words to better address the research aims.

4.1. Identifying Keywords

The initial list of the top 100 keywords was refined to a final set of 71 lexical items. This narrowing process was necessary because findings included both the first and last names of artists or the names of bands. To ensure consistency and avoid redundancy, these instances were treated as single items. Additionally, keywords that appeared in the interviewer's questions were excluded from the final set, as they were not considered part of the interviewees' lexical choices. Keywords were then grouped into two main semantic categories as shown in Table 1:

Category	Subcategory	Keywords
MUSIC PRODUCTION & PERFORMANCE	Individual artists	*Mitchell, Dylan, Presley, Joplin, Ronstadt, Jagger, Springsteen, Kristofferson, Dion, Stevie, Baez, Gaye, Clapton, Morrison, Elton, Raitt, Garland*
	Bands	*Beatles, Allman Brothers, Kinks, Everly Brothers, Eagles, Rolling Stones, Crosby Stills, Nash & Young, Tusk, Grateful Dead*
	Music creation	*songwriter, composer, lyric, song, musically, studio*
	Performance elements	*singing, sing, performer, musician, pianist, drummer, guitar, dancer*
	Music genres	*motown, folk, soul, rock*
MUSIC CONSUMPTION & PERCEPTION	Distribution	*Spotify, YouTube, jukebox, online*
	Venues/places	*New York City, Philadelphia, Jacksonville, California, Tanglewood, Miami, Brooklyn,*

		Bethel, venue
	Listener experience	*great, nostalgia, compelling, trigger, sexy, gender, always, sometimes, boys*
	Fan culture	*groupie, documentary, scrapbook*

Table 1
Top 71 keywords grouped into semantic categories.

This initial quantitative examination provides evidence of a notable gender distribution among referenced artists, with significant representation of female performers (*Mitchell*, *Ronstadt*, *Joplin*, *Baez*) alongside their male counterparts (*Dylan*, *Jagger*, *Kristofferson*, *Springsteen*). Keywords such as *motown, folk, soul, rock* reflect participants' engagement with a diverse range of musical genres. The lexical choices extend beyond individual performers and bands to encompass various dimensions of musical engagement, including production modalities (*songwriter*, *composer*), consumption practices (*Spotify*, *jukebox*), and evaluative language (*great*, *sexy*, *compelling, trigger*) that tend to express the emotional and sensory engagement with music through descriptions of powerful listening experiences. The usage of *gender* suggests that some discussions involve perceptions of masculinity and femininity in relation to music consumption practices. The keyword *boys* also refers to gendered ways of engaging with music. Words such as *always* and *sometimes* function as hedging or approximation strategies that shape the speaker's stance on their experiences. The co-occurrence of digital platforms alongside analog references suggests intergenerational technological adaptation rather than replacement. References to physical and symbolic spaces, such as *Tanglewood*, *Bethel* (site of the Woodstock Festival), or *Jacksonville*, underscore the significance of live music events and iconic locations as sites of cultural participation. Finally, regarding fan culture, explicit references to *groupie*, *documentary*, or *scrapbook* tend to indicate engagement with fandom practices, either through self-identification as a fan or through discourse on how audiences interact with musicians. While these terms do not appear frequently, their presence suggests varying degrees of fan involvement, from casual admiration to dedicated fandom that involves collecting memorabilia or engaging with music-related media.

Following a general overview of the keywords identified in the corpus, the analysis narrows its focus to two specific words (*great*, *The Beatles*) which serve as entry points for a more in-depth exploration of emerging discursive patterns. In addition, these words are also statistically significant according to corpus linguistics criteria for keyword analysis (Baker 2004).

4.2. Stance-Making

The in-depth analysis of the keywords engages with the literature that conceptualises stance, a notion which Biber defines as "the linguistic

mechanisms used by speakers and writers to convey their personal feelings and assessments" (2004, p. 109). While closely related to evaluation (Martin and White 2005), stance is a more formalised concept. It is carefully considered and refined over a period of time, rather than being instantly adopted. These operations are particularly relevant to the case under study as affective stance is used for evaluation and positioning in fan discourse over time (Biri 2023). In this context, fans' relationship with music operates in the domain of *affect*, where emotional responses and embodied experiences shape their engagement with songs, artists, and musical memories.

The home corpus contains many instances of evaluative language articulating the emotional and aesthetic dimensions of music appreciation. Speakers frequently draw on positively charged adjectives and intensifiers (e.g. "great," "adorable," "unbelievably good," "so interesting") to express inscribed evaluation (Martin and White 2005, p. 61)—that is, explicitly stated judgments and emotional responses—used to articulate the affective and aesthetic dimensions of musical experience. Figure 1 shows a sample selection of concordances of "great" as a lemma (91 hits) across the corpus:

	Details	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	ⓘ	', yeah, so we, all the wood, they put on all the shows and they were really	great	and there were very talented. The counselors, some of them were very tal
2	ⓘ	ıy Bennett's and um, Frank Sinatra, you know, I think a lot of their music is	great	, but it didn't like get me excited or anything, you know. I mean, I remembe
3	ⓘ	it was like, you know, this is really kind of revolutionary and this guy has a	great	voice and you know, he really was making waves and making statements a
4	ⓘ	ən all the Motown, you know, the The Supremes, all that stuff, really, really	great	. And Bob Dylan, who at first I didn't like because I didn't like his singing. B
5	ⓘ	ld come on And she was like, what is this? Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's great. It's	great	. Little generational split, but. Yeah, I think maybe it was John's father or pc
6	ⓘ	ɔicky about people who are good musicians. So the, the music might have	great	lyrics, but if the music itself isn't good or if the singer's voice is off, then I'm
7	ⓘ	very, very strong women who are not just, um, getting supported for being	great	musicians, but they're also, you know, taking control of their financial affair
8	ⓘ	ıg and and a lot of that kind of stuff and that kind of excitement, which was	great	. You know because you get all caught up in that and that that just adds yo
9	ⓘ	ŋg. And, you know, Dead lyrics are very poetic. You know, Jerry Garcia's a	great	poet. And I think that once I probably went to my, I remember coming up to
10	ⓘ	ɪ, you know, think, reconsider. And you know, The Allman Brothers are the	greatest	band ever. They are a great band, but you know, they don't. It just doesn't

Figure 1
Sample concordance output for "great" in the corpus.

In the Extract below, the evaluative language is both factual and subjective in describing a specific concert the speaker attended and in presenting her feelings about the music:

> (1) It the first time I saw him, I think Hunky Dory had already been out, I think it was the Ziggy Stardust show. So he started the show by coming, there was like a kind of a crane, the cherry picker kind of truck thing in on the stage. And it came down as if he was like Major Tom. And then he was in it and his feet were dangling over the audience while he was singing. So it was **very spectacular**. Bowie was a spectacle and a theater. Right. **So he wasn't just standing like The Beatles**. I mean, even though they make **great** new movies and music, **amazing** stuff that was **different**. Right. They were standing there playing their instruments and then Bowie was like, "Oh no, I'm putting on a show". And he was, you know, gender fluid and sexual, sexual and **fascinating**. And the show was **incredible**. Every song was **tight**. His band was **amazing**. Mick Ronson was **great** on the guitar and Trevor Bolder was

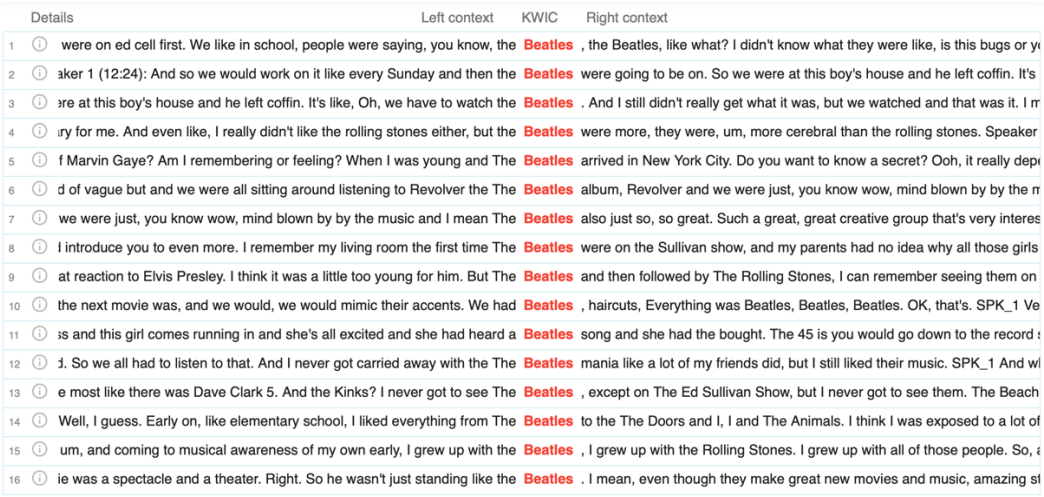
> **amazing** on the base. He was just, and he, **he commanded your time and energy and brain while you were with him, like you weren't anywhere else**. If you're like a person who you usually think, "Oh, tomorrow I have to go to the store and get dinner or something." No, **you weren't thinking anything**. **You were just there** and you were **transcended** into his mind.

The speaker relies heavily on positively charged adjectives (e.g. "spectacular," "amazing," "great," "incredible," "fascinating," "tight") as well as on grammatical structures ("So he wasn't just standing like The Beatles") to construct a vividly emotional and immersive account of a David Bowie performance. Particularly, the speaker conveys a powerful emotional reaction, using affective terms ("transcended") and describing a state of complete absorption ("he commanded your time and energy and brain," "you weren't thinking anything," "you were just there"). This description highlights an almost out-of-body experience, framing the performance as a moment of heightened consciousness and emotional intensity.

This kind of imagery is also used in other accounts. In the Extract below, for instance, the speaker talks about The Beatles' arrival on the US scene, constructing it as a sort of collective emotional awakening, evoking a kind of communal rapture ("totally entranced"). This stance portrays musical experience as both emotionally transformative and socially unifying:

> (2) **Until everything changed** when I became a teenager in the 60s and it was like, oh, **going somewhere else**. **The whole world was changing**. You know, **The Beatles came and everybody was just totally entranced.** I've learned every word to every song of, you know, especially "Sergeant Peppers," because all of us did it, you know. And I went to summer camp. We would like walk into town singing every on that album and with, you know, I had a little transistor radio that at night I would. Tied under the covers so that my parents didn't know I was awake and I'd have the little earpiece in and I'd listen to the rock stations that were starting in New York at that time. And all night long I'd stay up all night listening to. I think it was WNEW.

As these Extracts already show, it soon becomes evident that the frequent nominal references to prominent musical performers and bands serve as evaluative cues. A band that is mentioned in all the interviews is *The Beatles* (41 hits). To provide a representative sample of the corpus data, the following concordance lines (Figure 2) are retrieved from each document included in the corpus:



	Details	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1		were on ed cell first. We like in school, people were saying, you know, the	Beatles	, the Beatles, like what? I didn't know what they were like, is this bugs or y
2		aker 1 (12:24): And so we would work on it like every Sunday and then the	Beatles	were going to be on. So we were at this boy's house and he left coffin. It's
3		re at this boy's house and he left coffin. It's like, Oh, we have to watch the	Beatles	. And I still didn't really get what it was, but we watched and that was it. I m
4		ry for me. And even like, I really didn't like the rolling stones either, but the	Beatles	were more, they were, um, more cerebral than the rolling stones. Speaker
5		f Marvin Gaye? Am I remembering or feeling? When I was young and The	Beatles	arrived in New York City. Do you want to know a secret? Ooh, it really dep
6		d of vague but and we were all sitting around listening to Revolver the The	Beatles	album, Revolver and we were just, you know wow, mind blown by by the m
7		we were just, you know wow, mind blown by by the music and I mean The	Beatles	also just so, so great. Such a great, great creative group that's very interes
8		I introduce you to even more. I remember my living room the first time The	Beatles	were on the Sullivan show, and my parents had no idea why all those girls
9		at reaction to Elvis Presley. I think it was a little too young for him. But The	Beatles	and then followed by The Rolling Stones, I can remember seeing them on
10		the next movie was, and we would, we would mimic their accents. We had	Beatles	, haircuts, Everything was Beatles, Beatles, Beatles. OK, that's. SPK_1 Ve
11		s and this girl comes running in and she's all excited and she had heard a	Beatles	song and she had the bought. The 45 is you would go down to the record
12		. So we all had to listen to that. And I never got carried away with the The	Beatles	mania like a lot of my friends did, but I still liked their music. SPK_1 And w
13		e most like there was Dave Clark 5. And the Kinks? I never got to see The	Beatles	, except on The Ed Sullivan Show, but I never got to see them. The Beach
14		Well, I guess. Early on, like elementary school, I liked everything from The	Beatles	to the The Doors and I, I and The Animals. I think I was exposed to a lot of
15		um, and coming to musical awareness of my own early, I grew up with the	Beatles	, I grew up with the Rolling Stones. I grew up with all of those people. So,
16		ie was a spectacle and a theater. Right. So he wasn't just standing like the	Beatles	. I mean, even though they make great new movies and music, amazing st

Figure 2
Sample concordance output for "Beatles" across corpus documents.

Predictably, The Beatles emerge as a shifting cultural phenomenon fulfilling a range of discursive functions within the corpus. As the examples below will further illustrate, the band operates as a chronological marker, a touchstone for generational and individual identity, and a medium for expressing agency in relation to music preferences:

> (3) **I remember in junior high school**, when you were alone in your room doing your homework, you had the radio on and if you heard a song that you knew your friend liked, you would call her and […] it was very shared. […] I loved all the Phil Spector stuff. I didn't know that it was the Wall of Sound. I just liked the sound. Now I, you know, know more about it. **And then when the Beatles came**, um, we, like **in school, people were saying**, you know, **the Beatles, the Beatles**, like what? **I didn't know what they were like, is this bugs** or you know, because **they weren't here, but a film of them performing was on one of the late night shows**. **I forget who it was**. So some of my friends had seen it and they said, and they're going to be on the **Ed Sullivan**. **And so I was, I was, I was in I think Eighth Grade and we were in English class**. We had a group project where like four or five of us girls and boys. And we had to put on an oral report about *Silas Marner*. And so we would work on it like every Sunday **and then the Beatles were going to be on**. So we were at this boy's house and it's like, "Oh, we have to watch the Beatles". **And I still didn't really get what it was, but we watched and that was it.** I mean, it was maybe, you know, **it was partly being with these other kids and you know, someone saying this is important**, but it was, and then, you know, you heard them on the radio and I mean then at through high school, "did you see them?" Once I saw them like, oh, well **I just thought they were adorable and I loved** the, you know, **their music** and that they sang like a whole range of things, songs that they wrote.

It is generally postulated (Pelletier 2015) that when telling their stories, speakers place themselves and the events of their lives on a public timeline

rather then on a purely personal one. As Extract 3 exemplifies, the speaker situates her Beatles-related recollections within both collective and personal chronologies, employing temporally anchored expressions that foreground subjective experience within specific historical events (e.g., "I remember when the Beatles came," "So some of my friends had seen it and they said, and he's going to be on Ed Sullivan. And so I was, I was, I was in I think Eighth Grade and we were in English class"). The initial encounter with the band marks an emotionally charged, transitional moment between unfamiliarity ("I didn't know what they were like, is this bugs") and the formation of fandom ("Once I saw them like, oh, well I just thought they were adorable and I loved the, you know, their music").

Most speakers also reveal an evolution in how they relate to The Beatles, and, more generally, to music over time. Initial attraction focuses on immediate sonic appeal, while later appreciation encompasses production knowledge:

> (4) **Now many years later**, we we actually know a guy who wrote a big biography of The Beatles, which was very interesting and that had **a lot of detail about the production of the songs**. It's it's **even more interesting** because you see what the contributions of the different people are. You know it didn't just come to John, Paul and, whatever, Ringo and George didn't just go in the studio and had it all together. There were there was **a lot of input and arranging** that was going on by other people with the product is just unbelievably good and **so interesting**.

This progression from casual listening to informed appreciation enables speakers to show accumulated cultural capital and agency in their musical preferences. In another interview, the comparative framing of The Beatles as "more cerebral" than the "raw" Rolling Stones establishes the speaker's critical evaluation:

> (5) I really didn't like the Rolling Stones either, but the Beatles were more, they were, um, **more cerebral** than the Rolling Stones. The Rolling Stones were kind of **raw** and you know, **like sort of sexy or you know, "Under My Thumb" and that kind of stuff.** And you know, the Beatles were like, um, about like their mind and it was, you could go anywhere with their music. **I felt like the Rolling Stones were like, they have their message and it's not for me**, you know, and **even like the way they play**. Then the jumping around on the stage.

Particularly, through this evaluative stance, the speaker positions herself with values associated with refinement, introspection, and sophistication. Moreover, her distancing from the Rolling Stones' "raw" masculinity and stage presence ("they have their message and it's not for me... even like the way they play") further underscores a refusal to align with dominant masculine-coded musical expressions ("like sort of sexy or you know,

"Under My Thumb" and that kind of stuff"). Instead, she appears to articulate a preference for the interpretive openness and cerebral aesthetics associated with The Beatles, thereby positioning herself—at least implicitly—as an informed and autonomous listener. This stance contrasts with the majority of mainstream writing and discussions on music, where women are often portrayed primarily in relation to men—as muses, groupies, or fangirls—while their own experiences, ideas, and arguments tend to be dismissed or overlooked.

Speakers also provide evidence of how Beatles fandom facilitated social integration and identity formation, as shown by the abundant descriptions of communal activities ("we would mimic their accents," "we had Beatles haircuts," "we were all sitting around listening to *Revolver*"). These shared experiences established in-group boundaries, particularly visible in the favourite-member discourse ("Some people love John"). This collective identification extends to physical artifacts of fandom ("I still have the cards that came with bubble gum") and imitative behaviours ("Everything was Beatles, Beatles, Beatles"). Notably, speakers use The Beatles as a point of cultural differentiation, both generationally ("my parents had no idea why all those girls were going so crazy") and within peer groups ("I never got carried away with the Beatles mania like a lot of my friends did"). As noted in the above Extract, this discursive positioning enables narrators to assert musical competence while simultaneously marking individual perspective and evaluative stance. The example that follows offers an additional evidence of the subjective construction of music-related meaning in regard to The Beatles:

> (6) **I don't remember watching them on TV**, but **I do remember** that there's something had this song, "She Loves You." Yeah, yeah, yeah. And **I remember driving with my mother in the car**. Yeah. And that would come on and she was like, "what is this? Yeah, yeah, yeah" and I said "It's great. It's great." **Little generational split**, but…and then "I Want to Hold Your Hand." **They were just, you know**. Again I keep using the word **exploding**, but you know just would **grab you so much** and then **I can remember at some point going to a party** in the city must have… It's kind of vague but and **we were all sitting around listening to *Revolver* the**…The Beatles album, *Revolver* and we were just, you know wow, **mind blown** by by the music and I mean The Beatles also just **so, so great**. **Such a great, great creative group**.

In this account, the temporal expression ("at some point going to a party in the city") sequences events and anchors musical memories within a personally meaningful chronology. This is particularly evident in the shift from the non-remembering ("I don't remember watching them on TV") of a pivotal moment in American pop culture—such as The Beatles' first live U.S. television appearance on The Ed Sullivan Show on February 9, 1964, to a series of short anecdotal sections ("I remember driving with my mother in the

car," "It's kind of vague but and we were all sitting around listening to *Revolver"*) to better reflect her own experience (Pelletier 2015, p. 343). As in Extract 4, by drawing a clear contrast between her own enthusiastic reception of The Beatles' song ("It's great. It's great") and her mother's bewildered response ("what is this? Yeah, yeah, yeah"), the narrator constructs an in-group versus out-group dynamic, demarcating generational boundaries. Moreover, the reported dialogue serves as a performative act, dramatising the generational divide and emphasising the narrator's affiliation with the musical tastes of her peer group, thus reinforcing her self-positioning within a specific cultural context. Throughout the account, the narrator's alternation between individual ("I") and collective ("we") pronouns plays a crucial role in constructing this sense of communal belonging. The scene "we were all sitting around listening to *Revolver*" represents a shared moment of musical appreciation and indicates that record listening functioned as a collective social practice. Later in the story, she asserts her expertise by referencing a personal connection to an external source of authority ("we actually know a guy who wrote a big biography") for those informed arguments, positioning herself as a knowledgeable participant in music-related discourse. This transformation from casual consumption to active fandom echoes Fiske's (1992) notion of "productive fandom," wherein the acquisition of specialised knowledge and language marks the evolution of the individual from mere consumer to culturally informed participant.

As the keywords extraction reveals, speakers refer to a range of artists and bands. These references are not always employed to convey positive evaluations. Rather, in some instances, performers are mentioned in order to express negative stances, which contribute to the construction and negotiation of the speaker's identity within the discourse. For instance, *The Allman Brothers* (11 hits)—who are generally regarded as one of the pioneering bands in Southern rock, a genre commonly associated with hypermasculinity (Lechner 2018, pp. 123-124) as well as *The Rolling Stones* (23 hits) are sometimes mentioned by participants as music they are not interested in, or at least not interested in anymore. The following extract features a speaker recounting an episode from a later stage of her life, while simultaneously offering retrospective insight into her earlier—and still ongoing—engagement with music:

> (7) I'm going to tell you a story because it's like a really interesting story that when I was, I mean, **I've always gone to see shows**. When I moved to **New York**, I used to go see. All **the new wave shows and punk shows**, and I mean Washington has a really good music scene, but New York of course has the best one. But after, you know, I had my kids and I got divorced and I was trying to date every guy I would meet, like the guys I would meet, I would always say what do you have on your iPod? Like that would be how I would define somebody**. And so many of the guys that I met would have like live**

> **Rolling Stones shows or. You know, Allman Brothers or fish jam bands or that kind of thing. And it just doesn't interest me at all**. It just, I like, **I've always listened to**, you know, like **indie stations**. And of course now I listen, you know, to radio online a lot. I listen to California stations and NPR stations and, you know, rocks like alternative stations. **But every guy I was meeting was so interested in classic rock and it was so boring to me**. And I met one guy that I dated for a while. And really, I think the thing that drew us to each other is when we first met, we looked at each other's iPods and he was like, wow, I've never seen anybody else that has Calexico on their iPod. And I looked at his and he had great stuff too. And I think that was really the thing that drew us to each other. We didn't really end up, you know, going out for that long, but those were the days. Like the early 2000s when Craigslist was big and people would actually put like things in the personal ads on Craigslist. And I put an an ad, you know, on Craigslist and I it was in, you know, the dating site. I think I was 50. And I said, is there any guys like my age with kids divorced that don't listen to classic rock? Because **I find it really boring and really dated**, and I'm really interested in a guy like my age who listens to music that's more cutting edge than that.

In this account, the speaker positions herself in opposition to male peers who adhere to "classic rock" distancing herself from mainstream and masculine-coded taste which is negatively evaluated as stale cultural consumption ("I find it really boring and really dated"). In contrast, she constructs an alternative identity through references to active and ongoing engagement with live music ("always gone to see shows") and alternative media consumption ("listened to indie stations"). The relocation to New York is not merely framed as a spatial adjustement, but rather as a symbolic transition into a culturally elevated and musically vibrant environment ("New York of course has the best one"), which contributes to the speaker's self-construction as a more cosmopolitan and discerning musical subject.

4.3. Pronouns

To complement the analysis, the present article has also given attention to which pronouns rank most frequently in the corpus (Table 2). The use of pronouns is particularly relevant to oral history materials as pronouns contribute to the meanings conveyed by speakers (Fitzgerald 2022; Fitzgerald, Timmis 2024):

	Pronoun	Frequency
1	*I*	3,710
2	*you*	2,215
3	*it*	1,334
4	*we*	564
5	*my*	511
6	*they*	389
7	*me*	341

8	*she*	318
9	*he*	316
10	*your*	166

Table 2
Top ten pronouns ranked by frequency.

These results are both expected and complement the previous keyword analysis. Particularly, the high frequency of the first-person pronoun "I" reflects the strongly personal and subjective nature of oral history narratives, where speakers position themselves centrally in recounting experiences. The prominence of "you" suggests a conversational orientation, addressing the interviewer while primarily functioning as a discourse marker in the pattern "you know." The presence of "we" indicates moments of collective identification, signalling shared experiences or group belonging. Meanwhile, lower frequencies of third-person pronouns such as "he", "she," and "they" point to the relatively limited focus on external individuals, reinforcing the self-oriented and relational character of the accounts. By examining the verbal collocates that appear to the right of first-person singular pronoun, the analysis reveals that participants frequently use verbs that convey self-legitimation as they attempt to establish their credibility and authority, on the topic. These verbs fall into three broad categories.

First, knowledge or expertise markers—such as *know*, *understand*, *remember*, *realize*, and *recognize*—position speakers as informed and reflective individuals. Through these verbs, narrators lay claim to cognitive authority, often grounded in memory, comprehension, or insight. Second, opinion and assessment verbs—including *think*, *believe*, *mean*, *guess*, and *appreciate*—enable speakers to frame their personal viewpoints as meaningful contributions. Even when hedged, such as with *guess*, these expressions function as evaluative tools, reinforcing the speaker's interpretive role. Finally, verbs reflecting experience-based authority—like *see*, *watch*, *listen*, *go, experience*, *grow, read*—signal a direct or evolving relationship with the topic, drawing on sensory perception, lived experience, or formal learning. Together, these collocational patterns illustrate how oral history participants strategically assert epistemic authority, positioning themselves as both credible witnesses and active meaning-makers. The Extracts below are both telling examples of these stance-making processes:

> (8) I'll tell you that another concert that I thought was fantastic and I was really surprised to find this one was John Mellencamp. One year I couldn't figure out, and this was when I was married to my second husband. I couldn't figure out what to get him for Christmas and there was a concert right around Christmas and so I got us really good tickets and I didn't even… We weren't huge fans of his. It was just that **I knew** it would be a decent show and well, it turned out to be a fantastic show. It was one of the best shows I've ever been

> to and and. Fantastic! **I learned** the difference of a band that does a lot of rehearsing. **I mean**, a lot of rehearsing. It really shows on stage. Some bands just get up and play and they're good. But you know, this was so professional, so professional and interestingly enough, another thing. One time **I went** to a show, a John Fogerty show and I fell in love with the drummer. I was like, God, I love that drummer. I don't even, I'm not a drummer person. But this guy, I was like Oh my God, you know **I** could just **watch** him and forget the everybody else. So that that turned out to be Kenny Aronoff.
>
> (9) I never joined a fan club and I didn't do scrapbooks and stuff. I just bought records. I **listened** to records on my own constantly, because I was a big reader. And so I spent a lot of time in my room **listening** to music and reading. So there was a lot of that. And I had a pretty eclectic collection. So I just **listened** to whatever I had, you know, I did the old stack them all up on the on the spindle, on my, on my little portable stereo and just. Let them all play. No particular rhyme or reason. Just stack them all up and let them go.

As these examples show, the accumulation of action and cognition verbs reinforces a sense of self-directed experience and judgment, demonstrating how first-person narration, paired with verb choices, becomes a key resource for self-legitimation in oral history discourse.

5. Conclusions

This study has explored how women linguistically construct and reflect on their musical engagement through emotionally rich, evaluative language. Drawing on a corpus of first-hand interviews with American women belonging to the Boomer generation, the analysis has shown that affective stance is not only central to the way participants recall and discuss their musical experiences, but also functions as a powerful tool for positioning themselves as listeners, fans, and cultural participants.

The corpus results indicate a strong presence of positively charged adjectives and intensifiers (e.g. *great, amazing, spectacular, incredible, so interesting*), used to inscribe emotional responses and aesthetic judgments explicitly. Frequent nominal references to key artists—most prominently The Beatles—act as evaluative cues, functioning as markers of personal taste, cultural belonging, and generational identity, embedding personal memories in broader historical events and reinforcing a sense of collective awakening or shared transformation. Negative evaluations serve to position speakers against dominant taste cultures, reinforcing identities aligned with alternative, cosmopolitan, or critically engaged listening practices.

Pronoun patterns reveal the centrality of the self in these narratives (*I* being the most frequent word in the corpus) alongside moments of collective identification signalled through *we*. The collocational profile of *I* with verbs of cognition (*know, remember, understand*), opinion (*think, believe,*

appreciate), and experience (*see, listen, go*) highlights how speakers assert epistemic authority, legitimising their perspectives as knowledgeable and reflective rather than purely affect-driven.

Overall, stance is not merely an expression of uncritical devotion; rather, it reflects a combination of emotional investment and informed, knowledge-driven appreciation. In doing so, these accounts challenge dominant discourses of female music fandom that often privilege male-centric, hyper-committed models of fan identity. The women's narratives foreground a quieter, affectively grounded form of engagement that is no less meaningful or culturally significant. By resisting reductive stereotypes—such as the screaming teenage fan or the obsessive memorabilia collector—the discourse of these participants redefines what it meant to be a fan in the 1960s and 1970s, highlighting reflective, embodied, shared, and intellectually engaged forms of musical appreciation.

In this way, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of music reception, one that recognises gendered diversity in how cultural participation is expressed. It also underscores the importance of linguistic resources in shaping how affect is articulated and negotiated. The integration of corpus-based methods with close reading of illustrative extracts has been particularly productive in demonstrating how linguistic patterns are enacted in personal accounts, and vice versa, how lived narratives give depth and meaning to the statistical findings.

Ultimately, the narratives analysed here invite a reconsideration of what it means to be a fan, revealing a spectrum of engagement that is personal, affective, and discursively complex. While the findings of this study offer valuable insights into the discursive construction of musical engagement among Boomer-generation women, they cannot be taken as fully reflective of a broader generational history. As such, the study does not aim to generalise but to illuminate how affective stance and evaluative language function in personal recollections of music. Future research could expand this approach by contrasting female and male oral histories in both their affective and evaluative dimensions, in order to better understand how gendered forms of engagement with rock music are linguistically constructed.

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POP SONG LYRICS THROUGH THE LENS OF SOCIOLINGUISTICS
A case study of Bob Dylan's lyrics

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Abstract – Pop song lyrics are unique communicative artifacts within contemporary culture on account of their distinctive semiotic properties, characterized as they are by a close relationship between music and words which imposes substantial constraints on text constitution and song structure, involving special rhetorical, rhythmic and phonic features, sometimes accompanied by some "poetic" (in Jakobson's sense) stylistic devices. But lyrics are also unique for their ability to mirror many important themes of contemporary culture and capture socio-cultural moods and changes. This means that the language of pop song lyrics tends to be socially connoted and may bear traces not only of the author's linguistic background, but also of diatopic and diastratic variation. This is why lyrics can be seen as ideal objects to be investigated by means of sociolinguistic analytical tools. This study aims at testing this idea, by applying a sociolinguistic approach to a case study, Bob Dylan's song lyrics (1961-1970). In the article, an analysis of their most meaningful linguistic features is presented, discussing their phonological, morphological and syntactic peculiarities also in the light of quantitative data obtained through corpus linguistics. Their significance is discussed in the perspective of the artist's linguistic identity, but also as documents of authentic usage of spoken AmE. The findings confirm that interesting results can be attained by taking a sociolinguistic approach to the analysis of pop song lyrics.

Keywords: pop song lyrics; sociolinguistics; Bob Dylan; text for music; American English.

1. Introduction

Studies of musical discourse explore a wide variety of genres, some of which are metadiscursive/metamusical (i.e. they consist of 'talk about music'), while others take account of the musical element as part of the semiotic makeup of the works investigated, based on the recognition that music functions as a discourse component, along with the linguistic element (Bristiger and Dalmonte 1990). This emerges clearly in Aleshinskaya's essay on the analysis of musical discourse and its diversity, where she lists seven representative genres within it: song lyrics, live performances, musical interviews and reviews, Internet forums, academic publications, and jam

sessions (Aleshinskaya 2013, p. 423). In actual fact, it could be argued that *stricto sensu* only one of these genres does qualify as musical discourse in its own right: song lyrics. Of the other genres, two – live performances and jam sessions – include musical products but also oral texts aimed at entertainment, while four – musical interviews and reviews, Internet forums, academic publications – are only metamusical.

Lyrics will be at the centre of this discussion of the discourse of music as a privileged object of investigation from the viewpoint of applied linguistics although there are also other genres actually involving a synergy between music and language.[1] For instance, the opera is another important and long-lived genre combining the two, with librettos providing excellent research material especially for philology and language history (cf. e.g. Giovannini and Skorinkin 2024; Pavan 2019, 2020).

From the viewpoint of applied linguistics, pop song lyrics are unique communicative artifacts within contemporary culture on account of their distinctive textual properties, characterized as they are by a close relationship between music and words which imposes substantial constraints on text constitution and song structure, involving special rhetorical, rhythmic and phonic features (e.g. alliteration, rhyme, etc.), sometimes accompanied by some "poetic" stylistic devices. Lyrics are also unique for their ability to mirror many important themes of contemporary culture and capture socio-cultural moods and changes. In the age of mass communication and media, thanks to their broad circulation and extensive penetration (Adorno 1941/1998) songs reflect various aspects of contemporary society and, at the same time, address topical issues, often assuming cultural and political significance (Garzone 2012) through more or less explicit stance-taking, which in some cases may have a non-negligible impact on public opinion.

This study takes an approach to the analysis of pop song lyrics based on sociolinguistics, an area of linguistics that explores the relationship between language and society focusing on language variation as a function of different variables (geography, social class, gender, age, etc.), and tests its effectiveness in this type of research, by applying it to a case study, Bob Dylan's song lyrics (1961-1970). This will also provide an opportunity to discuss the vexed question of the language variety and pronunciation used by that Nobel Laureate artist.

The article is organised as follows. The complexity of the song as a semiotic event will first be discussed (§1.1), and materials and methods introduced (§1.2). Then, after a brief introduction to Dylan's poetics (§2), some textual and stylistic aspects that are recurrent in his texts will be examined (§2.1), before proceeding to the actual sociolinguistic analysis of

[1] For an overview of music with text, cf. Lewis 2011.

their phonological, morphological and syntactic peculiarities (§2.2), whose significance will be discussed in the perspective of the artist's linguistic identity. Conclusions (§3) will follow on the usefulness of sociolinguistics in the analysis of song lyrics.

1.1. Complexity of the 'song' as a semiotic event

The song is a semiotic event of great complexity in which the linguistic component, in its various aspects, phonic-prosodic, lexical, syntactic and semantic, is associated with the musical element, as well as with a whole series of other factors relating to performance. Therefore, it is rather difficult to clarify rationally the role played by each of these different components in the process of signification (Middelton 1990, pp. 256, 300ff.). The combination of words and music determines a situation of "multiple stratification" of the signifier (text, music, musical performance, singing performance), further complicated by the nature of the system of articulation of music which, as Umberto Eco makes clear, is not simply double, like that of language, but presents multiple and differential articulations (Eco 1975, pp. 231-233).

In this respect, an analogy emerges between texts for music and poetry, an analogy that can be easily identified thanks to certain superficial features such as the structuring into stanzas, the crucial importance of the phonic-rhythmic aspect, the repetition of certain phrases or paragraphs (e.g. the refrain, but not only), often highlighted by the presence of the rhyme (BaileyShea 2021). All these elements can be traced back to one single aspect that the language of song lyrics and the language of poetry have in common, namely the prevalence of the poetic function: in the text for music "the selection is based on equivalence, similarity and dissimilarity, synonymity and antonymity, while the combination, the build up of the sequence, is based on contiguity" (Jakobson 1960, p. 358), given that "the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination" (*ibidem*). As shown by Nicolas Ruwet (1987, p. 293), this prevalence characterises also the musical text, which presents the maximum of repetitiveness and the minimum of informativeness because of the "regular reiteration of equivalent units" thus determining what Ruwet (1972, p. 70) describes as "introversive semiosis" (*ibidem*):[2] all the references of musical signs are enclosed within the higher structure to which they belong as their components, music being its own repository of musical meanings (Krupińska 2014, pp. 253-254). Text accompanying music by necessity follows this

[2] On Ruwet's semiotic theory of musical discourse and its indebtedness to Jakobson's, cf. Krupińska 2014.

structuring. It can thus be concluded that music and lyrics, interacting in the song, determine a strengthening of the prevalence of the poetic function.

Shifting the focus of this discussion to the kind of language used within this system, it can be observed that while until the 1950s songs mostly showed a clear preference for poetic diction, in more recent times lyrics have tended to exhibit many features of current – and mostly colloquial – usage, often evidently suggestive of a specific context or situation and thus laden with connotations and intimations. Therefore, they offer valuable samples of authentic language.

This means that the language of lyrics tends to be sociolinguistically connoted and bears traces not only of the author's (or singer's) idiolect, but also of diatopic and diastratic variation, while diaphasic variation tends to be hardly there, with the only exception – according to Aleshinskaya (2013, p. 434) – of hip hop songs sometimes containing hip hop jargon related to the professional side of musical life.

These characteristics make lyrics especially interesting as objects of investigation in linguistics and discourse analysis, as authentic language samples as well as specimens of an author's linguistic choices, capable of providing important clues for the description of her/his poetics and artistic identity.

1.2. Materials and method

To illustrate this approach, I shall take as a case study the lyrics of some of Bob Dylan's songs, characterized as they are by a diverse linguistic blend combining the sophistication of poetry and text for music with the sociolinguistic complexity of language varieties close to orality and even to the vernacular. In particular, the focus will be on songs produced in the early years of his career, considered especially interesting from the linguistic viewpoint because of the influence of the Folk Music Revival (Mitchell 2007) and of the so called "counterculture movement" (Yinger 1982), determining a committed quality of the texts, in keeping with the typical civil/political engagement prevailing in certain areas of pop music in that period.

While the analysis will be essentially qualitative, an electronic corpus has been constructed of all the lyrics included in Dylan's albums from *Bob Dylan* to *Nashville Skyline* (1961-1970), for a total of 46,461 tokens.[3] The software suite Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al. 2014) is used to obtain frequency lists and concordance lines, in order to find the quantitative confirmation of impressions formed with close reading.

[3] The edition of reference is *The Lyrics: 1961-2012* (Dylan 2016); occasional reference is also made to The *Writings & Drawings* (Dylan 1973).

In the analysis a sociolinguistic approach will be taken dealing with song lyrics as reflecting contemporary linguistic usage in certain diastratically and diatopically defined sections of society. This will involve an in-depth analysis of the language varieties used in the lyrics and the social and geographical variables with which such varieties are associated.

Song lyrics have attracted less scholarly attention from linguists than their richness as authentic data would have suggested. Research has been largely interdisciplinary, with contributions from stylistics (West 2019), musical pedagogy, musicology and literature (Parada-Cabaleiro, Mayerl, Brandl 2024; Pence 2011; Negus and Astor 2015), psychology (e.g. Barradas, Sakka 2022). More numerous are works focusing on case studies, looking at various authors or working on larger corpora, as Pettijohn and Sacco's (2009) analysis of a number of popular *Billboard* songs or Brand, Acerbi and Mesoudi's (2019) essay on the evolution of 50 years of song lyrics.

If then one turns attention to research on Dylan's songs, there is an immense body of studies, but many of them lean towards information, entertainment or popularization, being addressed to a general "lay" public, or deal with his songs from the viewpoint of the themes, the literary values, the political impact etc., while less attention is given to the lyrics as textual objects and their linguistic and discursive characteristics.

In the next section, some background information on Dylan's work will be given, before going on to look at the possible applications of the approach exemplified here.

2. An introduction to Dylan's poetics

In the early days of his career, Dylan's production was close to the Folk Music Revival, consisting of ballads, blues, topical songs, songs on pacifist, anti-racist and anti-capitalist themes, accompanied only by harmonica and guitar. After the 'electrification' (in 1965, cf. Wald 2015), he evolved towards more distinctly existential subjects, though not abandoning themes of civil commitment. Soon, the linguistic setting of the lyrics opened up to suggestions outside the world of music and songs, and in particular to the influence of the most diverse genres of poetic texts. Initially, inspiration came mainly from some of the poets of the Beat Generation, Jack Kerouac, Peter Orlovsky and especially Allen Ginsberg, with whom Dylan collaborated actively in the early 1970s. From Ginsberg he learnt the ability to abandon himself to the flow of apparently unconnected images in what can be described as "dada" style, the combination of apocalyptic and elegiac tones obtained through everyday language use, the visionary mood conveying an individualist, anarchic rebellion against the banality and degradation of contemporary society.

But Dylan is a cultured and eclectic artist, and over time his lyrics would host influences from many important poets of the English and American tradition, from Robert Browning to T.S. Eliot, from Walt Whitman to E.E. Cummings.[4] This is one of the innovative and distinguishing features of Dylan's production, which eventually resulted in a definitive change in the status of lyrics in pop music, as confirmed by his award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016, preceded by a nomination for the same prize in 1997.

He was, and still is, an incredibly prolific artist. In the 1960s, he wrote and published over 250 songs (cf. Heylin 2009: "Contents"), most of which in the blues and folk tradition, in the wake of Woody Guthrie, but with ever more substantial intakes from gospel, country, traditional pop and, above all, rock.

His songs deal with multiple themes, among them there are love songs – often songs of farewell or of disdain –, songs of commitment, with a critique of the modern age, expressing pacifist anti-nuclear-war and anti-capitalist ideals, but also songs featuring what has been defined "crazy surreal" or "dada". Overall, these choices defied the conventions of pop music and created a personal style that appealed to the counterculture of the times, although he always denied a militancy. Nonetheless, songs like "Blowin' in the Wind" and "The Times They Are A-Changing" became anthems of the anti-war and civil rights movement.

2.1. Stylistic features realising the "poetic" function

Dylan's lyrics are characterised by a complex linguistic mixture always resting on a base of everyday, strongly colloquial, unadorned language, even though in his production there are texts in standard AmE, often with sporadic traits of orality and informal usage, as for instance the celebrated text of *Blowin' in the Wind*, which features standard English usage except for the annotation of two colloquial phonetic variants (*blowin'* for *blowing*, and *'n'* for *and*), or *Love Minus Zero No Limits*, with the double subject (the so called "pronominal apposition": see §2.2 below) in the repeated sentence starting with "My love she …" (e.g. "My love she speaks like silence … My love she laughs like the flowers …").

The tones of plain everyday speech always predominate in the ballads, in the blues, in many of the texts on existential and everyday subjects, all the more frequent in his early production, where the choice of lower variants of the language reflects the conventions of the musical genres that inspired him or that he directly practiced, and their roots in working-class or rural America.

[4] On this aspect, cf. the Chapter "Don't Steal, Don't Lift. Appropriation, Artifice, Originality" in Yaffe 2011, pp. 93-124.

The use of these traits typical of spoken language is enhanced by his unique "grain of voice" ("grain de la voix"; cf. Barthes 1962), described "like sand and glue" by David Bowie (1971) and as "frankly nasal, as if sandpaper could sing" by Joyce Carol Oates (2004).

However, recourse to colloquial and popular – sometimes even sub-standard – forms, typical of socially and geographically marked language, does not detract from the poetic quality of the texts characterised as they are by a dense rhythm and sound texture and rich in vivid images, often boldly juxtaposed with no obvious semantic connections between them, although in many cases connections do emerge thanks to intertextual references or in performance by virtue of the combination with music.

A case in point is "Desolation Row" which hosts and distorts, indeed overturns, in a nightmarish and violent atmosphere, some of the most deeply ingrained *topoi* in Western culture – romantic love, the genius of science, the Good Samaritan – and a crowd of characters taken both from the real world (Bettie Davis, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Einstein) and from the most disparate literary sources, from fairy tales (Cinderella) to Shakespeare (Romeo, Ophelia) and Casanova, from the Bible (Cain and Abel, the Good Samaritan) to fiction, be it bourgeois novels (The Hunchback of Notre Dame) or popular horror stories (The Phantom of the Opera). This set of disconnected images is difficult to compose, but their meaning emerges quite unexpectedly from intertextual reference to Eliot's *Waste Land* (2022/2002), with a clue in the very title of the song, "Desolation Row" which can be interpreted an urban rephrasing of it, an idea that is reinforced by various echoes from the fundamental images of that poem: the mythical image, taken from the Tarot, of the Hanged Man in the first stanza; the myth of death by water in the image of the sinking Titanic (verses 97 ff. of *The Waste Land*) and then again the echo of verses 156 and 157 ("You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique / (And her only thirty-one") in the description of Ophelia ("For her I feel so afraid / On her 22nd birthday / She already is an old maid": vv. 37-40), expectations for the rain that bring regeneration and rebirth as an alternative to the impure ritual of sex, the "fortune-telling lady" an obvious reference to Mme Sosostris, who no longer even attempts to predict the future (vv. 27-28). In linguistic terms, an interesting aspect of these lyrics is that, as is made evident in the last stanza preceded by a piece played on the harmonica, the whole song before that interlude is the content of a letter, i.e. text in a position of projection (Halliday 1985/1994, 227-230), and has the orderly formal quality of written language in spite of the chaotic contents, while in the last few lines the language becomes colloquial and uncultured ('I can't read too good': fourth to last verse) coming from the voice of the narrating self, who – again – is reminiscent of Tyresias in the *Waste Land* ("I Tiresias, though blind …"). Here recourse to sub-standard linguistic expressions as a stylistic trait obviously serves to further contextualise the

narrative in social terms. This is an interesting modulation of language as a function of register, once more testifying to Dylan's mastery in handling linguistic resources.

Going back to the discussion of the general characteristics of the lyrics, and in particular to their metrical structure, the rhythm of Dylan's texts is mostly fluent and rapid, broken up into short verses, a fact that was noticed and appreciated by Allen Ginsberg who wrote about him:

> Sincerest form of flattery / is imitation they say
> I've broken my long line down / to write a song your way.[5]

In many texts there is an evident attention for rhymes and assonances, which are often there (e.g. in the ballads), although not always in orderly succession. Many of the lyrics are embellished by frequent recourse to rhetorical figures: an immense repertoire of metaphors, prosopopoeia ("Then the sands will roll out / a carpet of gold": "When the Ship Comes In"), similes often proposed in apparently incongruous combinations (e.g. "with your sheets *like* metal and your belt *like* lace": "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands"), synesthesia (cf. "Chimes of Freedom"). As befits texts for music, there are also very frequent anaphoras and all figures of repetition as well as syntactic parallelisms, often protracted for the entire song (think for example of "Blowin' in the Wind"), all stylistic features inspired by the ballad and the blues, but also by Ginsberg and the Bible.

Another noteworthy and distinctive recurring stylistic feature is the use of complex noun phrases, often in the form "N Ø N" with unusual combinations, obviously borrowed from Ginsberg: for instance, *cathedral evening*, *mercury mouth*, *warehouse eyes*, *geranium kiss*, *corpse evangelists*, *confusion boats*, *jingle jangle morning*. See the following example, which also features three interesting similes (underlined):

> With your *mercury mouth* in the missionary times
> And your eyes <u>like smoke</u> and your prayers <u>like rhymes</u>
> And your silver cross, and your voice <u>like chimes</u> […]
> ("Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands, ll. 1-3).

Another form of atypical noun phrases is "N of N": *mouth of a graveyard*, *Rivers of blindness*, *the pockets of chance*, *bordertowns of despair*, *child of clay*, *the disease of conceit*, *the tombstones of damage*, etc. (cf. Khalifa 2007: 171). For instance:

> Blind man breakin' out of a trance
> Puts both his hands *in the pockets of chance*

[5] 'On Reading Dylan's Writings', in Ginsberg 1975, p. 122.

Hopin' to find one circumstance
Of dignity
("Dignity" ll. 17-20)

2.2. The sociolinguistic dimension

The sociolinguistic identification of a specific language variety used by Dylan in his lyrics is a quite complex problem, even restricting the analysis to one single decade in his production. What variety of AmE he uses and whether he retains any traits of the idiom of his region of origin has been an object of heated debate for decades, with no conclusive results.

In Dylan's diction – as will be discussed in more detail shortly – there appear elements from many disparate geographical and social varieties. This is further complicated by the fact that diatopic varieties in AmE are relatively less diversified than those of some other languages like Italian, as one does not find true full-fledged dialects,[6] but varieties characterised by sub-standard traits and slang that are largely transversal, albeit with regional variants, and often associated with social variation (think, for example, of African-American English)[7]. Wolfram and Schilling give an extensive inventory of such traits in the appendix ("An Inventory of Distinguishing Dialect Features") to their book on American English, and describe them as significant in terms of the continuum between the standard and the vernacular, being representative of both social and regional variation (Wolfram and Schilling 2016, p. 367).

The language of Dylan's lyrics has been explored in a handful of specific studies, mostly quantitatively-oriented. Among others, Khalifa (2007) looks at vocabulary, verb forms and noun phrases and identifies a combination of Germanic vocabulary, Romance syntactic patterns and rural archaic British constructions in Dylan's language, which he sees as composing "an ambitious vision of universal focus". Working on a corpus from 1962 to 2012, Schmidtke (2013) finds that in terms of lexical density there are no major variations over time, nor changes in the preference for

[6] It should be noted that in the Italian/Romance sociolinguistic tradition, the term "dialect" indicates "an autonomous language system ... that has structural characters and a history distinct from those of the national language" as is the case for languages like Italian and Spanish, as well as "a spoken variety of the national language, i.e. a variety of the same system ... having the same structural characters and history as the national language" (Dardano 1997, pp. 171) and characterised by certain variation with respect to it, as is the case with most dialects of English. Cf. Wolfram and Schilling 2005, pp. 2-3. In this study the word is used here with the latter meaning.

[7] AAE is described as "a supra-regional vernacular norm comprising a set of distinctive traits that are shared wherever AAE is used in the United States". See Wolfram and Schilling (2005, p. 232).

verb tenses (past, present, future), the frequency of which remains virtually unchanged. In slight contrast, but taking the perspective of music psychology, Czechowski, Sylvestre and Miranda (2016, pp. 103-110), who work with a psychological-research-oriented software program combined with a qualitative inductive method, find a change in the choice of vocabulary in terms of semantic areas, in particular identifying a greater proportion of words that were indicative of cognitive complexity and religious content as Dylan's career progressed, – findings that are not directly relevant to this study, limited as it is to the first decade of the artist's activity. In a more recent stylometric study, Zheyuan Dai and Haitao Liu (2024) look at parts of speech and find that based on the distribution of verbs and adjectives the lyrics are significantly active and dynamic texts characterised by prominent individualism with a wide use of the first-person singular pronouns.

As far as diatopic variation is concerned, as pointed out above, Dylan's AmE is difficult to define in geographical and social terms, not least because to some extent his accent varies between performances, so much so that it has often been a subject of debate. Although he grew up in a middle-class Jewish family in the area of the United States known as Upper Midwest, for many listeners his accent and his use of the language are not easily framed within the variety of AmE spoken there, conventionally referred to as North Central AmE (Labov, Ash and Boberg 2006, p. 145ff.), because of the many personal traits that may be due to elements of the Southern variety, perhaps acquired through his practice of folk and country music and the blues, openly influenced by Southern and African-American cultures

In a chapter of his extensive (and partisan) study on Dylan's language, Pichaske (2010, p. 63ff.) analyses his American in the light of linguistic works specifically focused on the speech of the Upper Midwest (Allen 1976; Underwood 1981), and identifies a few traits typical of the American of that region, especially the recurrence of certain lexical clusters, the preference for the use of certain lexemes rather than other synonymous or competing ones (e.g. *sundown* rather than *sunset*, *dawn* rather than *sunrise*, *parlor* rather than *living room*, *gasket* rather than *coffin*, etc.) and recourse to certain typical idiomatic variants such as *somewheres* (which, however, is a hapax). Pichaske's analysis, however biased and working on small numbers, shows that after all Dylan's idiolect rests at least in minimum part on a substratum typical of his area of origin.

Moving on to a more detailed analysis, Dylan's lyrics have all the features that are typical of oral language scripts and feature a number of deviations from standard usage. Consonant and vowel reductions, elisions and contractions are recorded in the texts as well as in the scores. Of course, the written text is the transcription of the singer's actual pronunciation of certain words and expressions through non-standard orthography (Schalley *et al*. 2014), but establishes that pronunciation as an integral part of the song, to

be reproduced as such in any further performance by others.

See for instance the following lines from "Bob Dylan's New Orleans Rag" featuring a number of contractions and reductions (in italics):

> I was *sittin'* on a stump
> Down in New Orleans
> I was *feelin' kinda* low down
> Dirty and mean
> Along came a *fella*…
> ("Bob Dylan's New Orleans Rag")

Reductions like *kinda* for *kind of* and *fella* for *fellow,* which recur several times, and other similar ones are essentially phonological in kind, while in other cases – like *sittin'* and *feelin'* in the example above – the phonological component may also take on grammatical significance.

These two present participles – *sittin'* and *feelin'* – are examples of the so called *g*-dropping or ING variable (Hazen 2005), the process in English whereby in unstressed environments the *-ing* ending is pronounced with an alveolar nasal [n] instead of a velar nasal [ŋ]. It is shown in the conventional non-standard orthography by the use of an apostrophe in place of <g>, as in *walkin'* and *nothin'*.[8] Its frequency varies as a function of sociolinguistic variables, being especially associated with both a lower socioeconomic status and an informal speech style, while in the US it is more common in Southern speakers. In the Dylan corpus a search for «*in'» yields 718 hits, with a frequency of 1.5%, and apart from very few exceptions (*mornin*': 12 hits; *somethin*': 8 hits) the *g*-dropping regards the *-ing* desinence of the present participle. It can be considered to function as a pervasive mark of colloquiality.

In the following example there are instances of *g*-dropping both in the present participle and the indefinite pronoun:

> Well, ev'rybody's got s*omethin'*
> That they're *lookin'* forward to
> I'm *lookin'* forward to when I can do it all again
> And babe, I'll do it all over you
> ("All over You")

A similar potentially grammatical impact has the contraction of semi-modals, i.e. the distinction of (BE) *going to* vs *gonna* and (HAVE) *got to* vs *gotta* (Krug 2000; Pullum 1997) which are recurrent forms in spoken language in informal registers.

[8] As Wolfram and Schilling (2016, p. 76) aptly observe, the denomination *g*-dropping is somewhat misleading as "the process really involves the substitution of one nasal sound for another rather than the loss of a sound" all the more so as the <g> is never actually pronounced.

In this case there is a process of evolution from phonological to lexical variation, that is, the contracted forms are developing from pronunciation variants to independent items. See the following example:

> Well, you can run down to the White House
> You can gaze at the Capitol Dome, pretty mama
> You can pound on the President's gate
> But you *oughta* know by now it's *gonna* be too late
> You're *gonna* need
> You're *gonna* need my help someday
> Well, if you can't quit your sinnin'
> ("Please quit your low down ways (Quit Your Low Down Ways)"), *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, 1963)

While *oughta* is simply a local phonetic contraction, the phonetic reduction of the English semi-modal (*BE) going to* into *gonna,* is well known to linguists (Pullum 1997, Krug 2000), and is so frequent as a mark of colloquial register in AmE that it has been interpreted as being on its way to changing from pronunciation variant to independent item in what has been called as an "emancipation" process (Lorenz 2012, 2013). *Gonna* is rather common in the corpus, with 104 occurrences against 13 of the full semi-modal (*BE) going to*, to which 52 occurrences of *a-gonna* have to be added (see below).

Gotta, the parallel reduced form of (HAVE) *got to*, is much less common and in the corpus is used as frequently as the full form, with 114 occurrences against 113, as exemplified in the following stanza:

> But if *you got to go*
> It's all right
> But if *you got to go*, go now
> Or else *you gotta stay* all night
> ("But if you got to go, go now (Or else you gotta stay all night)"), *Another Side of Bob Dylan*)

Here the alternation of *got to* (2 occurrences) and *gotta* (1 occurrence) exemplifies the co-existence of the two forms in the corpus.

As regards *gonna* and its frequency, as pointed out above, there are 52 occurrences of *a-gonna* to be added. This form provides an instance of another interesting linguistic feature, clearly archaic and always intended to echo certain varieties of popular speech, the so-called "*a*-prefixing on *ing*-forms" or "*a- -ing* circumfix" graphically annotated with <a> to precede an *-ing* form[9] (often realised as *-in'*), for example:

> For the times they are *a-changin'*

[9] Of course, in the case of *a-gonna* the *-ing* desinence does not appear as such, but in its reduced form *gonna* in combination with -to.

> Women screamin,' fists *a-flyin*,' babies cryin' / Cops *a-comin*,' me *a-runnin*.'
> ('Talkin' Bear Mountain Picnic Massacre Blues')
>
> Then you heard my voice *a-singin'* and you know my name / I'm *a-wonderin*'
> if the leaders of the nations understand
> ("Train A-Travelin'")

This is the weakened outcome of the ancient locative form of the progressive: *he is on hunting >he is a-hunting>he is hunting*, which has been on the wane since the 1700s (Mossé 1938, p. 106ff.), but is still common in some vernacular varieties of American as well as British English. In the 1961-1970 corpus there appear as many as 202 occurrences of *a*-prefixed *-ing* forms (0.43%),[10] with *a-gonna* being the most frequent. In geographical terms, it is difficult to localize its distribution. Certainly it is recognized as a trait of informal American[11], but is pervasive in East Anglian English, and widely present in Appachian English, where it has been extensively studied (Wolfram 1976), in Bahamian English, in African American Vernacular English, and still present, but rare in Manx and Welsh English, in Southwest and Southeast of England dialects, and in Newfoundland English (cf. Kortmann *et al*. 2020.) Thus, more than anything else, frequent recourse to this trait provides evidence of informal/vernacular usage also characteristic of the folk song tradition in which Dylan recognised himself for a period of his career, continuing to draw inspiration from it also in the later stages.

An interesting trait that emerges from an observation of the concordances of *a*-prefixed *-ing (*or *-in'*) forms, obtained by searching the corpus for "*a*" followed by dash and a wildcard (*a-**), is the fact that *a-gonna* is preceded – with the exception of only 7 cases – by *ain't*, which is one of the most typical and recurrent forms marked for social class and informality in English.

Ain't is a very common form of negation in the lyrics, occurring 175 times (0.38%). As is well known, it is "a non-standard construction commonly used (especially in AmE) in place of *am not*, *is not*, *are not*, *has not* and *have not*" (Quirk *et al*. 1985, p. 129n.). Stigmatized by prescriptivists (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002, p 1611), it has been observed to be

[10] This finding appears in contradiction with data given by Khalifa (2007, p. 172) for his corpus of 401 songs from Dylan's early days to 2007 (111,555 words, 8,170 tokens), who found only 274 occurrences of *a-* prefixing in nearly twice as many songs as those in the corpus considered here, produced over a much wider span of time. This discrepancy may be explained either with the fact that Khalifa's corpus comprised a selection of songs and not the complete production of the artist in the time period covered, or with the hypothesis that the number of these forms is more limited in Dylan's later production, an aspect that has not been confirmed by research so far and will be ascertained in the further stages of this research.

[11] For a detailed study of the linguistic, social, and geographic distribution of *a*-prefixing data in North America cf. Burkette and Antieau 2022, based on the results of the Linguistic Atlas Project (LAP) of North America.

pervasively present in many varieties of English, being more associated with working-class speech in Britain, and considered more as a mark of colloquiality, but not (except jocularly) in academic contexts, in the US.

For instance, according to Kortmann, Lunkenheimer and Ehret (2020), *ain't* as the negated form of BE and *ain't* as the negated form of HAVE are attested respectively in 44% and 43% of the varieties of English they analyse in their *Electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English*, with a pervasiveness index of 60% and 59% (cf. also Palacios Martínez 2013, p. 213).
In the lyrics it appears prevalently as the negated form of BE (162 occurrences), in many cases followed by *gonna* or *a-gonna*, and is often used with a first-person singular pronoun as subject (46 occurrences), for example:

> *Ain't* it hard to stumble
> And land in some funny lagoon?
> ("Outlaw Blues")

> Oh, ye playboys and playgirls
> *Ain't a-gonna* run my world
> *Ain't a-gonna* run my world
> ("Playboys and playgirls" *Another Side of Bob Dylan*)

> I'll just say fare thee well
> *I ain't* sayin' you treated me unkind
> You could have done better but I don't mind
> ("Don't Think Twice It's Allright" *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*)

In a few cases *ain't* functions as a negated form of HAVE, often (but not always) followed by *got*:

> He *ain't* got no name
> But it *ain't* him to blame
> He's only a pawn in their game
> ("Only a Pawn in Their Game" *The Times They Are A-Changin'*)

> Well, I *ain't* got my childhood
> Or friends I once did know […]
> No, I *ain't* got no armies
> To jump at my command
> ("Guess I'm Doin' Fine" *The Times They are A-Changin'*)

Given the transversal geographical distribution of this linguistic trait, it is evident that more than anything else it is used as a mark of informal or colloquial orality.

This is reinforced by the fact that recourse to this form of negation is mostly accompanied by patently sub-standard forms, of which some examples can be found in the excerpts just quoted: use of the adjective for the adverb (you treated me *unkind*), double negation (He *ain't* got *no* name, I

ain't got *no* armies), but instances are numerous in mostly all the lyrics being discussed in this work.

See some other examples of double negation:

> There's too much confusion, *I can't get no relief* ("All Along the Watch Tower")
>
> These things *don't happen*
> *No more*, nowadays
> ("Long Ago, Far Away")

An example of recourse to sub-standard forms is the use of *to lay* for *to lie,* as in the title "Lay, Lady, lay" where, of course, the correct form *lie* wouldn't create the same "pun effect". It also appears in other songs:

> I'd *lay* awake all night ('If not for you')
>
> *Lay* down and die ('Neighbourhood bully'),

also in the past participle *laid* instead of *lain:*

> where my love and I had *laid* ('One too many mornings')
>
> Have you ever *laid* awake at night and wondered 'bout the same?
> (Train A-Travelin', *Bob Dylan*)

Non-standard variations in verb conjugation are also not infrequent:

> *it don't* take long to find out... ('Talking New York')
>
> why *don't she tell* / 'stead of turnin' by back t' my face?
> ("I don't believe you (she acts *like* we never met)")

and so are errors in many other adverbial and verbal forms, e.g.:

> I can't read *too good* ('Desolation Row')
>
> and the words that are used / *for to get* the ship confused ('When the Ship Comes In')
>
> *It don't matter* 'bout his position, *it don't matter* 'bout his lifestyle
> (Ain't No Man Righteous, No Not One)
>
> The bed it was bare
> And *I's left* alone with three children ("North Country Blues")

Also quite common are incorrect or hypercorrect verb forms, also found in the lyrics of Woody Guthrie and other folk singers, e.g., *knowed*:

> It ain't no use in turnin' on your light, babe
> That light *I never knowed*
> ('Don't Think Twice, It's Alright').

or the use of the past participle as simple past:

> For somethin' that *he never done* ('Hurricane').

Another recurring trait is the use of the verbal operator *do* in positive clauses where no emphasis is meant; Khalifa (2007, p. 173) finds 77 occurrences of it in his corpus, or 11% of all occurrences of *do*, for instance:

> Next animal that *he did meet* / Had wool on his back and hooves on his feet
> ('Man Gave Names to All The Animals')

> Achilles is in your alleyway, / He don't want me here, / *He does brag* / He's pointing to the sky / And he's hungry, like a man in drag /
> ("Temporary like Achilles")

> Outside in the distance a wildcat *did growl,* / Two riders were approaching, the wind began to howl. ("All Along the Watchtower")

In some instances, the *done* form accompanies a past tense to indicate the completion of the action: this is the so-called "completive done" (Wolfram and Schilling 2016, p. 378), typical of African American Vernacular English, which perhaps Dylan absorbed from his familiarity with the blues, for example:

> Her and her boyfriend went to California, / Her and her boyfriend *done changed* their tune ('Sign on the Window')

> another man *done gone* ('Waitin' for You').

Turning to intraclausal organisation, noteworthy is the recurrence of the so-called "pronominal apposition" i.e. 'the use of a co-referential pronoun in addition to a noun in subject position' (Wolfram and Schilling 2016, p. 388) which is a common feature of sub-standard American English in many of its regional varieties, for instance:

> *The line it* is drawn / *the curse it* is cast ('The times they are a-changin')

> *Queen Mary she's* my friend ('Just Like a Woman')

> Oh *my name it* is nothing ('With God on Our Side')

> *All your seasick sailors they* are rowing home ('It's All Over Now Baby Blue').

In a study of the correlation between pronominal apposition and *g*-dropping in Detroit, Wolfram and Schilling (2016, p. 168) find that a speaker from the lower working class is more likely to use both *-in'* for *-ing* and pronominal apposition than speakers from other classes.

Overall, the main finding emerging from this detailed discussion of the linguistic aspects of Dylan's lyrics is an overall tendency to include in his texts a range of linguistic features from the informal through to the vernacular and the uneducated, with a lower or higher frequency in different songs arguably as a function of various variables (the topic, the genre, the musical form, etc.).

3. Conclusion

What clearly emerges from the case study focusing on the distinctive features of the language variety used by Dylan in his lyrics is a confirmation of its heterogeneity, which defies all attempts to refer it to a single geographical or social variety, being largely composite and to some extent unstable. In most cases he chooses to use a kind of language that connotes itself as non-mainstream rather than regional, and is modulated to suit the theme and the musical genre of each song.

Initially influenced by the voices of the Folk Revival, Dylan politically and polemically disassociates himself from the establishment**,** preferring intimate, colloquial language that breaks with the rules of formality or choosing to be linguistically close to the lower classes, the marginalised and their subcultures. An extensive repertoire of informal, colloquial, and/or vernacular forms, in some cases sub-standard, is combined with poetic elements (in Jakobson's sense). The only real constant is the oral, colloquial quality of the texts and the tendency to deviate from what is expected.

In this respect, it can be useful to borrow from Sunstein (2022) the notion of "dishabituation". Music can be dishabituating, in other words when habit has reduced people's responsiveness to facts, things, problems, feelings, music can help re-awaken their reactivity. In this respect, Dylan is typically and systematically dishabituating. He never conforms to expectations, even those he himself has created with his previous songs. He deals with the favourite themes and uses the patterns and melodies of Country music, of the Folk Revival, of the counterculture of his times, but refuses to subscribe officially to them. As Hampton (2019, p. 13) points out, "Dylan's own art, from its very first manifestations, has consistently questioned, taken apart, and criticized every feature of the very culture that made it possible". And he also does so, consistently, in his use of the English language.

Thus, drawing some conclusions from this sociolinguistic analysis of the lyrics, it can be stated that the findings from a detail discussion grounded on quantitative data identify some salient aspects of Dylan's lyrics (1961-1970), shedding light on important peculiarities of his work and poetics that would not emerge as clearly from a traditional close reading. Furthermore, from the analysis an important lesson can also be learnt about some of the main linguistic features of informal AmE as spoken in everyday situations and/or in culturally deprived contexts. This provides an illustration of the interesting results that can be attained by taking a sociolinguistic approach to the analysis of pop song lyrics.

More in general, the case study has shown the effectiveness of a sociolinguistic approach to the analysis of pop song lyrics, for various reasons.

Firstly, sociolinguistic instruments make it possible to draw a picture of how artists construct their identities in their songs by adopting a language variety (or varieties) that contribute/s to collocating them in social (and ideological) terms and positioning them artistically within the contemporary cultural and musical scenery.

Secondly, pop song lyrics represent an outstanding sample of authentic language on account of their "density"; to gather instances of so many different linguistic features would otherwise require the collection of huge quantities of spontaneous exchanges. Thus lyrics make it possible to identify and analyse phenomena that are peculiar to language in real, informal, colloquial, vernacular or sub-standard usage, as the case may be.

Thirdly, if for the linguist these findings are interesting in themselves, they may also have important didactic implications, providing meaningful teaching materials both for the definition of language varieties in a descriptive linguistics perspective and for practical purposes, offering learners the opportunity to be exposed to informal uses of the language without having to go through large text quantities.

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SENTIMENT AND EMOTIONS IN TAYLOR SWIFT'S ALBUMS
A journey through the eras

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Abstract – American singer-songwriter Taylor Swift has navigated different musical styles throughout her career, ranging from country, to pop, to indie folk. Her albums are characterized by establishing the beginning of new eras, each marked by a defined aesthetics and sound. This research aims to scrutinize the evolution of Taylor Swift's lyrics throughout her discography in terms of sentiment and emotions. The main objective is to find out whether actual alignment exists between Taylor Swift's lyrics and the supposed eras that according to the artist have marked her work. To do so, we examine her discography in terms of sentiment and emotions. We use a mixed-methods approach to analyze each album's lyrics using several advanced text processing tools. To deal with sentiment, we analyze Swift's discography using an advanced sentiment analysis system that offers time series analysis. On the other hand, we extract the most salient emotions using an advanced corpus query tool designed for content and discourse analysis that allows the identification and raking of emotions according to Parrott's list. The results show that love and sadness dominate Swift's discography, with a predominantly negative sentiment. Additionally, there is a mismatch between the emotions in her lyrics and their sentiment classification, indicating that Swift's style does not rely on explicit positive or negative terms. Instead, her use of rhetorical devices and subtle language conveys meaning through more implicit forms.

Keywords: Taylor Swift; song lyrics; sentiment analysis; emotion detection; large language models.

1. Introduction

Taylor Swift has become a prominent figure in contemporary music, known for her versatility across various musical genres, ranging from country, pop, to indie folk. Over the past two decades, she has established herself in the music industry, achieving significant commercial success and earning recognition for her ability to write songs that connect with listeners on an emotional level. Swift writes or co-writes all her songs, and her voice and personal experiences have always remained a central part of her songwriting process. Thus, her lyrics play a crucial part in her music, and her fans all over the world, who are known as "Swifties", learn them by heart.

In this chapter, we attempt to analyze the words in Swift's songs by

applying a number of computational methods as well as qualitative analysis with a view to study the evolution of sentiment and emotions present in the lyrics, and how they align with eras that the artist herself uses to categorize and describe her music.

1.1. Overview of Taylor Swift's discography

Taylor Swift's albums are marked as eras. Every album she releases is treated as a unique chapter, with its own visual style, thematic focus, and musical direction. Every era is deliberately constructed to offer something new both visually and emotionally. When she creates an album, she adopts a specific look, sound, and even persona that aligns with the album's themes (Green 2024; Penn and Trust 2024). This allows her to engage her audience with her music in a new way with every release. Her early country albums, *Taylor Swift* (2006) and *Fearless* (2008), were characterized by youthful innocence, romantic optimism, and fairytale-like narratives. These were followed by *Speak Now* (2010), which Swift wrote entirely by herself. This era had a more mature tone and was focused on personal stories of love, heartbreak, and self-reflection, although it was still deeply rooted in her country background. *Red* (2012) marked a shift into a more diverse musical territory, blending country with pop and rock. It was an era of emotional complexity, as Swift explored love in its euphoric and devastating forms using the color red as a metaphor for emotions that are passionate and raw (Jagwani 2021). The *1989* (2014) era was Taylor's full dive into pop music, thus representing a break from her country roots. This era was characterized by a bright, synth-driven sound, and Swift centered her attention on independence, fun, and reinvention (Petridis 2024). Even her looks evolved during this era, as she adopted a chic, retro-inspired aesthetic that matched the sound of the album. *Reputation* (2017), in turn, was one of Swift's most dramatic transformations, as it came after a period of public scrutiny and media backlash. The aesthetic had a darker visual style and was inspired by snakes. Swift embraced a more assertive persona, even declaring in "Look What You Made Me Do" that the old Taylor was "dead". With *Lover* (2019), Swift returned to a brighter, more romantic persona. The pastel colors and the dreamy visuals of this era stood in stark contrast to the dark tones of *Reputation*. In 2020, Swift introduced yet another era with *Folklore* and *Evermore*, often referred to by the songwriter as *the sister albums*, as they were released five months apart. These albums marked a shift to an indie-folk sound, and they represented a quieter, more reflective mood, thus showing Swift's ability to shift into a more introspective, contemplative mode (Mylrea 2020). The *Midnights* (2022) era was based on the concept of sleepless nights and the thoughts that keep one awake at night. Its aesthetic was dreamy, dark, and steeped in mystery, as if between sleep and wakefulness. Finally, *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024), Swift's latest album, draws heavily from the idea of

the cursed poet, thus embodying the romanticism of self-destructive artists such as Dylan Thomas. Swift presents a black-and-white aesthetic where she reflects "a fleeting and fatalistic moment in time" (Nanji 2024).

1.2. Emotion identification and detection

Emotion detection is the process of identifying a person's various feelings or emotions (Nandwani and Verma 2021). Of course, any attempt to manually or automatically classify emotions presupposes an accepted pre-existing schema or taxonomy of emotions. Needless to say, human emotions present a wide spectrum or continuum of feelings, and arriving at an agreed-upon universal classification is no easy task.

The emotion models that have been proposed to date can be classified into two: dimensional emotion models, and categorical emotion models. The former represent emotions based on three variables or dimensions, namely, valence, arousal, and power, whereas the latter define emotions discretely, such as anger or happiness.

Thus, emotions are classified into categories according to the particular model being used. Ekman's model, one of the most salient in the literature, distinguishes six basic emotions: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise (Ekman 1992). The Human-Machine Interaction Network on Emotion (HUMAINE) project proposed the emotion annotation and representation language (EARL), which considers 48 emotions that grouped into 10 main ones: negative and forceful, negative and not in control, negative thoughts, negative and passive, agitation, positive and lively, caring, positive thoughts, quiet positive, and reactive (Douglas-Cowie *et al.* 2011). Parrott's classification, in turn, presents a tree-structured list of emotions (Parrott 2001) based on six primary ones: love, joy, surprise, anger, sadness, and fear, as shown on Table 1.

Primary emotion	Secondary emotion	Tertiary emotion
Love	Affection	Adoration / Fondness / Liking / Attraction / Caring / Tenderness / Compassion / Sentimentality
	Lust	Desire / Passion / Infatuation
	Longing	Longing
Joy	Cheerfulness	Amusement / Bliss / Gaiety / Glee / Jolliness / Joviality / Joy / Delight / Enjoyment / Gladness / Happiness / Jubilation / Elation / Satisfaction / Ecstasy/ Euphoria
	Zest	Enthusiasm / Zeal / Excitement / Thrill / Exhilaration
	Contentment	Pleasure
	Pride	Triumph
	Optimism	Eagerness / Hope

	Enthrallment	Enthrallment / Rapture
	Relief	Relief
Surprise	Surprise	Amazement / Astonishment
Anger	Irritability	Aggravation / Agitation / Annoyance / Grouchy / Grumpy / Crosspatch
	Exasperation	Frustration
	Rage	Anger / Outrage / Fury / Wrath / Hostility / Ferocity / Bitterness / Hatred / Scorn / Spite / Vengefulness / Dislike / Resentment
	Disgust	Revulsion / Contempt / Loathing
	Envy	Jealousy
	Torment	Torment
Sadness	Suffering	Agony / Anguish / Hurt
	Sadness	Depression / Despair / Gloom / Glumness / Unhappiness / Grief / Sorrow / Woe / Misery / Melancholy
	Disappointment	Dismay / Displeasure
	Shame	Guilt / Regret / Remorse
	Neglect	Alienation / Defeatism / Dejection / Embarrassment / Homesickness / Humiliation / Insecurity / Insult / Isolation / Loneliness / Rejection
	Sympathy	Pity / Mono no aware / Sympathy
Fear	Horror	Alarm / Shock / Fear / Fright / Horror / Terror / Panic / Hysteria / Mortification
	Nervousness	Anxiety / Suspense / Uneasiness / Apprehension (fear) / Worry / Distress / Dread

Table 1
Parrott's emotion classification.

As in any classification task, the fewer categories, the easier it is to make the classification. Therefore, in emotion detection shared tasks, such as those from SemEval (Chatterjee *et al.* 2019; Kumar *et al.* 2024) simpler emotion models with fewer categories are commonly used, as it simplifies both the task itself and the evaluation process. In this research, however, we employ Parrot's schema because, although it offers many emotion labels, they are hierarchically arranged, and therefore evaluation of the classification results can be done at the primary level even if secondary or tertiary emotion categories are used by the large language model (LLM henceforth) that we employ for automatic identification. This is further explained in Section 3.1.

1.3. Sentiment analysis

Sentiment analysis is a Natural Language Processing (NLP henceforth) task that attempts to automatically process people's opinions and sentiments towards other entities (e.g., products, services, individuals) and their attributes (Liu

2015). Its main aim is to analyze texts automatically to detect polarity, emotions, and/or intensity. This is generally done through the identification of lexical, iconographic, and structural features, in addition to using advanced algorithms to process them, in order to classify a document on a scale that determines its semantic orientation (Lei and Liu 2021; Moreno-Ortiz 2019).

Regarding its tools and techniques, these can be machine-learning, lexicon-based, or a combination of both. Machine-learning approaches use a set of features which are learned from annotated corpora, and although they have reached high levels of performance in language data analysis, they still perform poorly in domains they have not been previously trained on (Aue and Gamon 2005; De Clercq *et al.* 2017). The lexicon-based approach uses a lexicon to provide the polarity for each word or phrase found in the text, sometimes in combination with some system to account for valence shifters (Moreno-Ortiz *et al.* 2019; Muhammad *et al.* 2016; Taboada 2016). However, this type of approach also presents some drawbacks, as it requires rich lexical knowledge to achieve good results in different domains (Moreno-Ortiz and Pérez-Hernández 2018). Moreover, contextual valence shifters represent a challenge both at the sentence and discourse level, since phenomena such as metaphors, sarcasm, or understatements can entail shifts in polarity.

Sentiment analysis is inherently concerned with the study of evaluative language, i.e., linguistic expressions that describe a speaker's attitudes, feelings, and judgement, as well as their commitment towards the message (Benamara *et al.* 2017). Consequently, it has been widely applied to the domain of online consumer reviews about movies, books, restaurants, hotels, or other types of consumer products (Abdullah *et al.* 2023; Ameur *et al.* 2024; Khan *et al.* 2010; Moreno-Ortiz *et al.* 2019; Singh *et al.* 2013). It has also been applied to the domain of song lyrics in combination with emotion detection: Sharma *et al.* (2016) carried out a sentiment analysis of lyrics to classify them according to whether they are suitable for certain audiences or not, while Choi *et al.* (2018) proposed a method for the recommendation of music using emotion and sentiment analysis based on lyrics. More recently, Du (2024) explored how sentiment analysis can detect emotions within lyrics, determining whether a song conveys positive, negative, or neutral emotions. However, they already addressed the issue of working with song lyrics and advanced the role that complexity and the ambiguity of lyrical language can play in this type of analysis.

To our knowledge, nonetheless, no previous work has been carried out on emotion detection and sentiment analysis of a particular artist's or band's discography. For this reason, the present work attempts to investigate Taylor Swift's production with the aim of exploring whether her lyrics show a transition between her eras through the examination of her discography in terms of emotions and sentiment.

2. Research design

2.1. Objectives and methods

The main objective is to find out whether actual alignment exists between Taylor Swift's lyrics and the supposed eras that according to the artist have marked her career and her discography. To do so, we examine her discography in terms of sentiment and emotions. Therefore, the main research question can be formulated as "do Swift's songs show an evolution in Swift's discourse in terms of sentiment and emotions that aligns with the *eras*?" This objective involves several operational prerequisites that determine the following specific objectives:

1. Specific objective 1: to gain insights into the most salient emotions contained in her discography.
2. Specific objective 2: to identify the evolution in the semantic orientation of the singer's eras.

To achieve this goal, we use a mixed-methods approach to analyze each album's lyrics using several advanced text processing tools. To deal with sentiment, we analyze Swift's discography using Lingmotif 2 (Moreno-Ortiz 2023), a lexicon-based sentiment analysis system. On the other hand, we extract the most salient emotions using Corpus Sense (Moreno-Ortiz 2024a, 2024b), a corpus query tool designed for content and discourse analysis. Specifically, we employ Corpus Sense's *Insights* feature, which uses an LLM model to extract very specific information from a corpus or subcorpus, such as the identification of rhetorical devices, rhetorical style, register, and sarcasm. For this work we used the emotion detection insight to identify and rank emotions according to Parrott's list of emotions.

2.2. Corpus

To accomplish the aforementioned objectives, we compiled a corpus of all of the artist's songs, from her self-titled album (*Taylor Swift* 2006) to her latest release to date (*The Tortured Poets Department* 2024). It must be noted that for the purposes of this work, we used the deluxe versions and the "Taylor's Versions" (TV henceforth) of her songs. The reasoning behind this choice is that these editions include more songs and, consequently, a higher number of words, thus offering a more thorough analysis of her discography. Nonetheless, we excluded songs written for films, such as "Safe and Sound", "I Don't Wanna Live Forever", or "Eyes Open", as they were based on such films' plot and, therefore, we consider that they are unrepresentative of Swift's eras. A total of 11 albums and 230 song lyrics files were included in the corpus, as shown on

Table 2. Please note that although the albums *Fearless*, *Speak Now*, *Red*, and *1989* were originally released in 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014, correspondingly, their TV versions were not released in a chronological order, as shown on the table. It must also be noted that, when cleaning text for this corpus, we decided to remove repetition of expressions such as "la la la" or "oh oh oh", as it was noticed that they mainly functioned as fillers and did not add meaning to the songs.

Album	**Year**	**Songs**	**Words**
Taylor Swift	2004	15	4,271
Fearless	2008 (TV: 2021)	26	8,980
Speak Now	2010 (TV: 2023)	22	9,355
Red	2012 (TV: 2021)	30	11,729
1989	2014 (TV: 2023)	22	9,690
Reputation	2017	15	7,760
Lover	2019	18	7,818
Folklore	2020	17	5,381
Evermore	2020	17	6,406
Midnights	2022	17	8,047
The Tortured Poets Department	2024	31	11,553
Total		**230**	**90,990**

Table 2
Number of words in the corpus.

3. Analysis of results

3.1. Emotions

The first step in our analysis involved using Corpus Sense's *Insights* tool to obtain a quantification of the presence of different emotions in each of the albums. Corpus Sense uses a built-in LLM, currently Qwen 2.5 (Qwen Team 2024), to query a corpus or subcorpus (sampling it if necessary) about very specific aspects, including emotion detection and quantification.

Even the responses returned by the LLM acknowledge the difficulty involved in this endeavor, with remarks such as "Analyzing human emotions is not an easy task and specific personal context may play an important part in

identifying the proper emotions". As expected, responses were reasonably accurate but often incomplete. A typical LLM response as returned by Corpus Sense is shown (partially) in Figure 1.

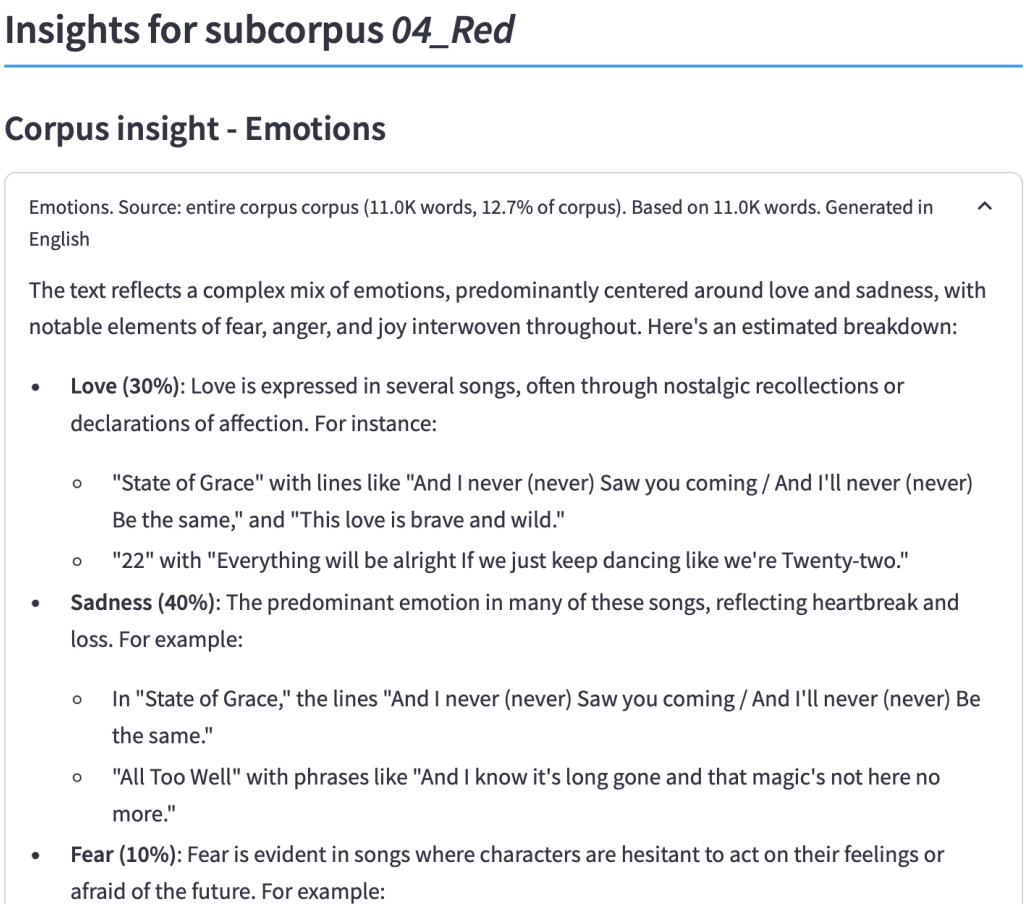

Figure 1
Example of LLM response.

The prompt that Corpus Sense employs to generate this response instructs the LLM to use Parrott's primary emotions (love, joy, surprise, anger, sadness, and fear), and although it generally abides by these instructions, it sometimes offers other more specific emotions, such as nostalgia, regret, or longing. This is why we decided to use Parrott's (2001) hierarchical model, as these specific emotions are almost always included within the secondary or tertiary sets of emotions in Parrott's model, and therefore can be easily mapped to the primary set, which are the ones we actually use to quantify them after manual analysis of the lyrics.

The manual annotation process consisted in labeling text chunks of arbitrary length for each of the primary emotions in Parrott's model and then counting them and calculating the proportions against the total number of labeled text segments per album. In general, the quantification offered by Corpus Sense's LLM, after mapping those labels that did not belong to the set of primary emotions and recalculating totals for those cases where the LLM

produced wrong total proportions,[1] were not too far off our own, manually-annotated one. We summarize the results of both Corpus Sense (CS) and manual annotation (MA) in Table 3.

Album	Love (%)		Joy (%)		Surprise (%)		Anger (%)		Sadness (%)		Fear (%)	
	CS	MA	CS	MA	CS	MA	CS	MA	CS	MA	CS	MA
Taylor Swift	30	29	8	6	2	0	15	19	42	39	3	6
Fearless	30	36	25	17	15	0	10	14	15	30	5	4
Speak Now	30	32	15	12	10	5	5	16	35	24	5	10
Red	35	24	5	11	10	1	5	15	30	42	15	7
1989	25	28	10	25	8	1	20	13	30	15	16	7
Reputation	30	57	15	9	8	0	15	15	27	3	5	15
Lover	30	46	20	17	10	0	5	7	30	8	5	22
Folklore	40	28	6	15	8	0	15	14	30	32	2	11
Evermore	25	26	5	12	5	1	15	11	40	40	10	10
Midnights	20	31	10	21	5	4	15	15	40	23	10	6
TTPD	35	16	2	11	5	1	25	33	30	32	3	7
Diff. (mean)	**9.91**		**7.18**		**6.64**		**4.64**		**11.18**		**6.36**	

Table 3
Evaluation of emotion quantification by LLM and manual annotation (M=7.91, SD=2.43).

The overall average difference is only 7.91%. Obviously, this relatively strong agreement does not unequivocally validate either quantification, since our single-annotator manual classification cannot be claimed to be a gold standard, but it does suggest that the LLM did produce close-to-human results.

Figure 2 visualizes the results of manual annotation as an ordered sequence that represents the evolution of the different emotions in Swift's lyrics over time.

[1] Large Language Models excel at achieving higher-order cognitive tasks, such as summarizing text or, more to the point, recognizing the expression of emotions in text. However, they are known to struggle with certain relatively simple tasks, such as counting (and therefore calculating correct proportions). In our experiments, it was often the case that the LLM produced percentages whose proportions did not add up to 100, which we fixed manually. The actual responses provided by the LLM can be found in this article's repository in PDF format, the link to which will be provided once the article review process has been completed in order to ensure anonymization.

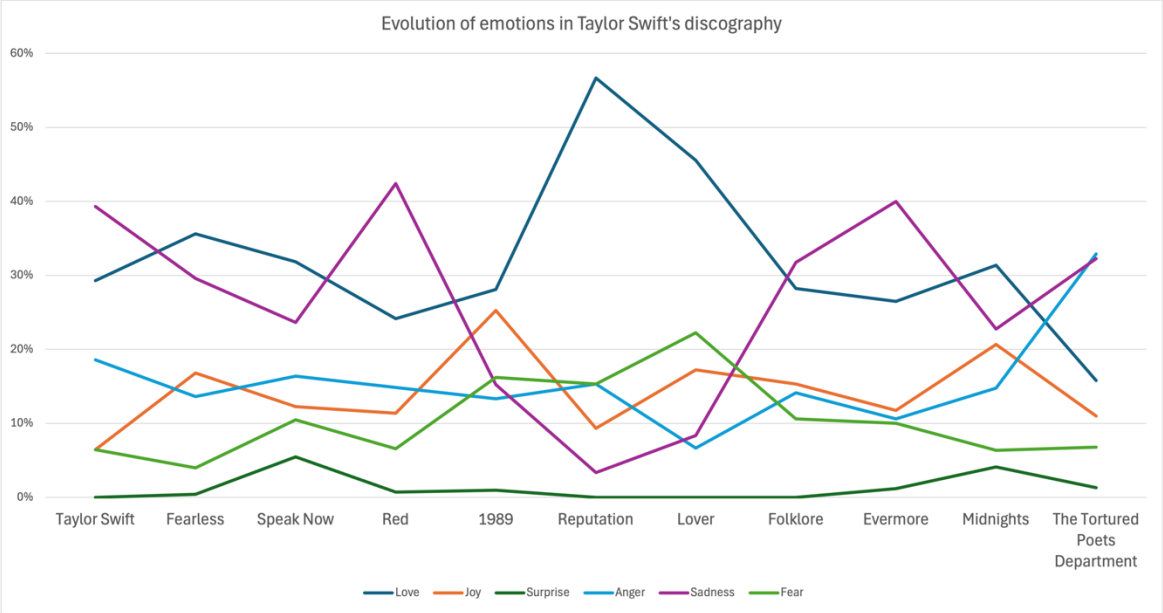

Figure 2
Evolution of emotions in Taylor Swift's discography.

Two main emotions stand out in Swift's discography: love and sadness. Generally, when one of them appears as the first one, the other follows closely, and they were usually properly identified by Corpus Sense's analysis.

Swift's self-titled album is centered around themes of young love, heartache, and self-discovery. It was released when she was 16, and, consequently, the album draws on her personal experiences as a teenager navigating romance and heartbreak. In this context, sadness is the main emotion (37%), as Swift portrays anguish ("Teardrops on My Guitar"), agony ("Tied Together With a Smile", "Cold as You", "Invisible"), or melancholy ("Tim McGraw"). This is closely followed by love (33%), present as tenderness ("Mary's Song"), adoration ("Stay Beautiful") or liking ("I'm Only Me When I'm With You", "Our Song"). Anger also plays a relevant role in this album (19%), especially in the form of rage ("Picture to Burn", "Should've Said No").

The album *Fearless* continues to explore the highs and lows of adolescence, thus combining catchy melodies with heartfelt storytelling. It represents the first shift from sadness as the main emotion, as love becomes the primary one (36%) and can be found in the form of longing ("Love Story", "You Belong with Me"), liking ("Hey Stephen"), or caring ("Jump Then Fall"), among others. Sadness (30%) is still present through emotions such as anguish ("Breathe") or disappointment ("You're Not Sorry", "Forever & Always"). In this album, joy also plays a very relevant role (17%), present as excitement ("Fearless"), happiness ("The Best Day"), or pride ("Change").

Speak Now reflects Swift's transition from adolescence to adulthood, as she examines her growth and experiences. It is the first and only album that Swift wrote entirely without the help of any co-writers, and, consequently, the

songs showcase her evolution as an artist and individual. This album continues to present love (31%) and sadness (24%) as the main emotions. Love can be found in a wide variety of forms: desire ("Sparks Fly"), infatuation ("I Can See You"), tenderness ("Ours"), or longing ("Mine"). Sadness, on the other hand, is present as regret ("Back to December") or grief ("Last Kiss"). It can also be found alongside anger (15%) as a combination of hurt and resentment ("Dear John"), as well as bitterness ("Better than Revenge"), contempt ("Mean"), and frustration ("Foolish One") alone.

Red, defined by the artist as "a fractured mosaic of feelings" that "resembled a heartbroken person" (Jagwani 2021), is the album with sadness in the highest proportion (42%). It materialized in a wide variety of forms: hurt ("All Too Well"), anguish ("I Almost Do"), pity ("The Lucky One"), melancholy ("The Moment I Knew"), sorrow ("Ronan"), *grief* ("Forever Winter"). This emotion is followed by love (24%) and anger (15%). The former can be found as tenderness ("Stay Stay Stay"), liking ("Everything Has Changed", "Begin Again"), or longing ("Run"); while the latter is present as frustration ("I Knew You Were Trouble") or annoyance ("We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together", "Girl at Home").

In the next three albums, sadness is not a salient emotion. In *1989*, Swift presents a narrative of self-discovery, independence, romance, and reflection through three main emotions: love (28%), joy (23%), and fear (19%). Love materializes as tenderness ("You Are in Love", "This Love", "Slut!") or desire ("Style"), while joy is found as amusement ("Blank Space", "Shake it Off") or thrill ("Welcome to New York", "New Romantics"). Fear, on the other hand, is shown as anxiety ("Out of the Woods", "I Know Places").

Reputation is the album where love is found in the highest proportion (56%). This is interesting if we bear in mind that this is the first album that Swift released after her public fallout with Kanye West and Kim Kardashian, which led to a media backlash against her. In this album, Swift states that "the old Taylor can't come to the phone right now / Why? Because she's dead", thus suggesting that her innocent and uncontroversial image no longer exists. Musically, she presents a darker and more aggressive sound with heavy beats and distorted vocals, which create a mood of confrontation and defiance. It is then surprising to find such a vulnerable emotion as love predominating in a wide variety of forms: as desire ("Ready For It", "Don't Blame Me"), attraction ("Gorgeous"), adoration ("King of my Heart"), or tenderness ("Call It What You Want", "New Year's Day"). It is followed by fear (15%) and anger (15%). Fear is present as anxiety ("Delicate", "Dancing with Our Hands Tied"), while anger can be found as outrage ("Look What You Made Me Do") and scorn ("This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things").

In *Lover*, Swift returns to an optimistic type of sound, as she embraces a more colorful, pop-driven production that reflects a positive feeling. In this context, it is not surprising to find love as the most prominent emotion (46%), portrayed in

the form of tenderness (“Lover”, “Paper Rings”) and desire (“False God”). It is followed by fear (22%) and joy (17%). The former is especially present as anxiety (“The Archer”, “Miss Americana & The Heartbreak Prince”, “Afterglow”, “Soon You’ll Get Better”, “Death by a Thousand Cuts”), as she worries about losing her loved ones, whether friends, family, or partner. Joy, on the other hand, can be found as gaiety (“Me!”, “You Need to Calm Down”) and relief (“I Forgot that you Existed”).

Folklore and *Evermore* are viewed by Swift as sister albums, as they were released five months apart and share several overarching themes, since they are both deeply introspective, storytelling-driven projects that focus on escapism and nature imagery. It is thus unsurprising to find that both albums present the same emotions (although in different proportions), and that both represent a shift from the previous ones. Sadness reappears as the main emotion (32% in *Folklore*, 40% in *Evermore*), followed by love (28% in *Folklore*, 24% in *Evermore*) and joy (15% in *Folklore*, 14% in *Evermore*). Sadness can be found as despair (“Exile”, “Hoax”), guilt (“Champagne Problems”, “Coney Island”), loneliness (“Tolerate It”), and melancholy (“Happiness”). Love is present through tenderness (“Invisible String”), longing (“Willow”), and attraction (“Cowboy Like Me”), while joy is in the form of amusement (“The Last Great American Dynasty”) and relief (“Long Story Short”).

Midnights explores the concept of sleepless nights and the thoughts that surface during those hours when the mind is restless. Therefore, this album is deeply introspective. It represents the last appearance of love (31%) as the first emotion, followed by sadness (23%) and joy (21%). Love is especially present in the form of tenderness (“Snow on the Beach”, “Sweet Nothing”, “Paris”) and desire (“Lavender Haze”), while sadness is realized as melancholy (“Midnight Rain”), grief (“Bigger Than the Whole Sky”), and loneliness (“Dear Reader”). Joy is also present as triumph (“Karma”) and thrill (“Bejeweled”, “High Infidelity”).

Swift’s latest album, *The Tortured Poets Department*, was conceived during a turbulent period in Swift’s personal life, following constant breakup and dating rumors. The album serves both as a reflection on personal turmoil and a commentary on the tension between private emotion and public persona. In this context, it represents a departure from all her previous albums in terms of emotions. For the first time, an emotion other than love and sadness ranks at the top: anger (33%). This emotion appears in a wide variety of forms: as fury (“Who’s Afraid of Little Old Me?”), bitterness (“The Smallest Man Who Ever Lived”, “Cassandra”), contempt (“Thank You Aimee”), and torment (“The Black Dog”). Anger is closely followed by sadness (32%), which can be found as agony (“My Boy Only Breaks his Favorite Toys”, “I Can Do with a Broken Heart”), grief (“How did it End?”), and melancholy (“Chloe or Sam or Sophia or Marcus”). Love appears in this album in the lowest proportion of Swift’s discography (16%) as attraction (“The Alchemy”) and desire (“So High

School").

3.2. Sentiment

A first approach to assessing the overall sentiment in Swift's discography is simply to use to the emotion annotations discussed in the previous section. If we ignore surprise, which does not inherently convey polarity (a surprise can be positive, negative or neutral), the other five emotions can easily be classed, at least in principle, as positive (love and joy) or negative (anger, sadness, and fear). Aggregating the proportions can be done by simple averaging. Table 4 shows the results of this aggregation.

	Love	**Joy**	**Anger**	**Sadness**	**Fear**
Taylor Swift	30	8	15	42	3
Fearless	30	25	10	15	5
Speak Now	30	15	5	35	5
Red	35	5	5	30	15
1989	25	10	20	30	16
Reputation	30	15	15	27	5
Lover	30	20	5	30	5
Folklore	40	6	15	30	2
Evermore	25	5	15	40	10
Midnights	20	10	15	40	10
TTPD	35	2	25	30	3
Mean	**30**	**11.00**	**13.18**	**31.73**	**7.18**
	Positive emotions (mean)		Negative emotions (mean)		
	20.5		17.36		

Table 4
Overall sentiment assessment by emotion grouping.

This methodology suggests that positivity prevails, albeit slightly, over negativity. However, it is worth using more sophisticated means to qualify sentiment for several reasons. First, love is not necessarily a positive emotion and does not always occur in positive contexts. For example, among the top ten modifiers of the noun "love" in Swift's lyrics, we find both positive (*magic*, *beautiful*, *true*, *great*), and negative words (*faithless*, *crooked*, *calamitous*). Also, as mentioned above, surprise may involve either positivity or negativity. These two factors alone may skew the results considerably and, in fact, change the overall polarity, as the aggregated emotion scores (20.5 vs 17.36) are not very far apart. Thus, we should use more sophisticated means, such as a lexicon-based sentiment analysis system to confirm these findings.

Figure 3 shows the overall sentiment scores returned by Lingmotif. The TSS (Text Sentiment Score) scores texts on a scale of 0 (extremely negative) to

100 (extremely positive), while the TSI is an intensity score where higher values indicate higher intensity.

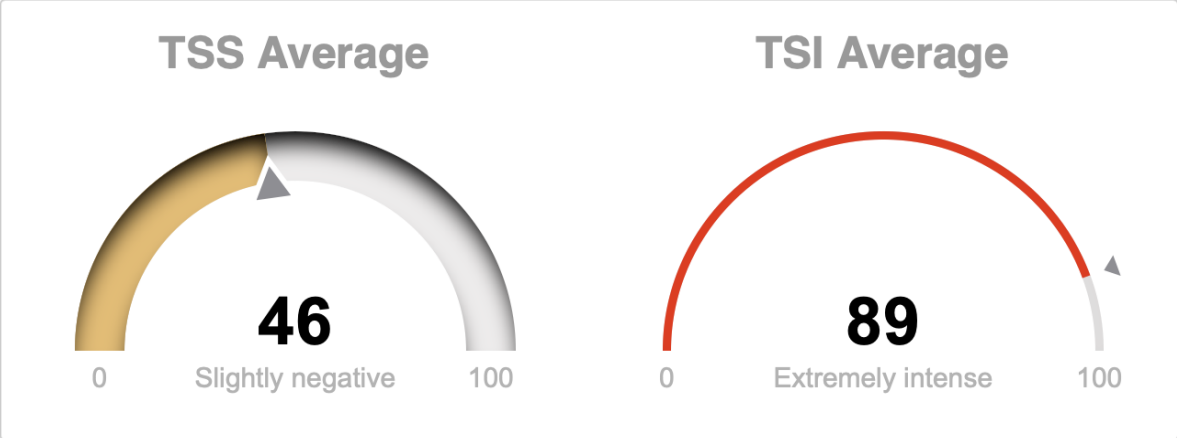

Figure 3
Sentiment analysis of the whole corpus.

A TSS of 46 does indeed tip the scales in favor of a slightly predominant negative sentiment, which contradicts the emotion aggregation results. The system also gives a score of 89 in terms of intensity, which is to be expected in lyrics where the main theme revolves around personal relationships.

Table 5 below shows the top 10 positive and negative items identified by Lingmotif in Taylor Swift's whole discography, as well as their absolute frequency in the corpus. Please note that these items have been lemmatized.

Top positive items		**Top negative items**	
Item	**Frequency**	**Item**	**Frequency**
love	374	lose	87
good	89	bad	86
smile	75	cry	52
best	66	hate	49
kiss	52	die	42
beautiful	50	screaming	37
like	35	fake	35
fall in love	33	mad	34
welcome	32	trouble	31
nice	27	wrong	31

Table 5
Top positive and negative lexical items.

The results show that the top positive terms in Swift's discography are mainly associated with being in love (e.g., "love", "kiss", "beautiful", "fall in love"), as shown in examples (1)-(3), where she sings about the early stages of being infatuated and starting a relationship.

(1) But can you feel this magic in the air? It must've been the way you **kissed** me / Fell in **love** when I saw you standing there (Today was a Fairytale)

(2) What must it be like to grow up that **beautiful**? / With your hair falling into place like dominos (Gold Rush)

(3) I **fell in love** with a careless man's careful daughter / She is the best thing that's ever been mine (Mine)

In turn, we can also find negative expressions that can be associated with emotional distress or even suffering (e.g., "cry", "die", "screaming"), as shown in (4) below, as the songwriter conveys a very intense feeling of grief. Loss of control (e.g., "mad", "trouble", "wrong") is also very much present in her songs, as can be seen in (5)-(6). Overall, we can see that the negative terms are fairly dramatic, while the positive ones, although present in a much higher frequency, are not as intense.

(4) Now I want to sell my house and set fire to all my clothes / And hire a priest to come and exorcise my demons / Even if I **die screaming** (The Black Dog)

(5) I knew you were **trouble** when you walked in (I Knew You Were Trouble)

(6) Isn't that what they all said? / That I'll sue you if you step on my lawn / That I'm fearsome and I'm wretched and I'm **wrong** (Who's Afraid of Little Old Me?)

The analysis of the evolution of sentiment in Swift's discography is shown in Figure 4 below, where the trend line clearly shows an increasingly negative semantic orientation. In fact, there seem to be two phases in her discography: one ranging from *Taylor Swift* to *Lover*, where the TSS remains around 50 on average, and one ranging from *Folklore* onwards, in which the TSS barely goes above 40. In other words, the use of negative words and expressions is increasing in her lyrics.

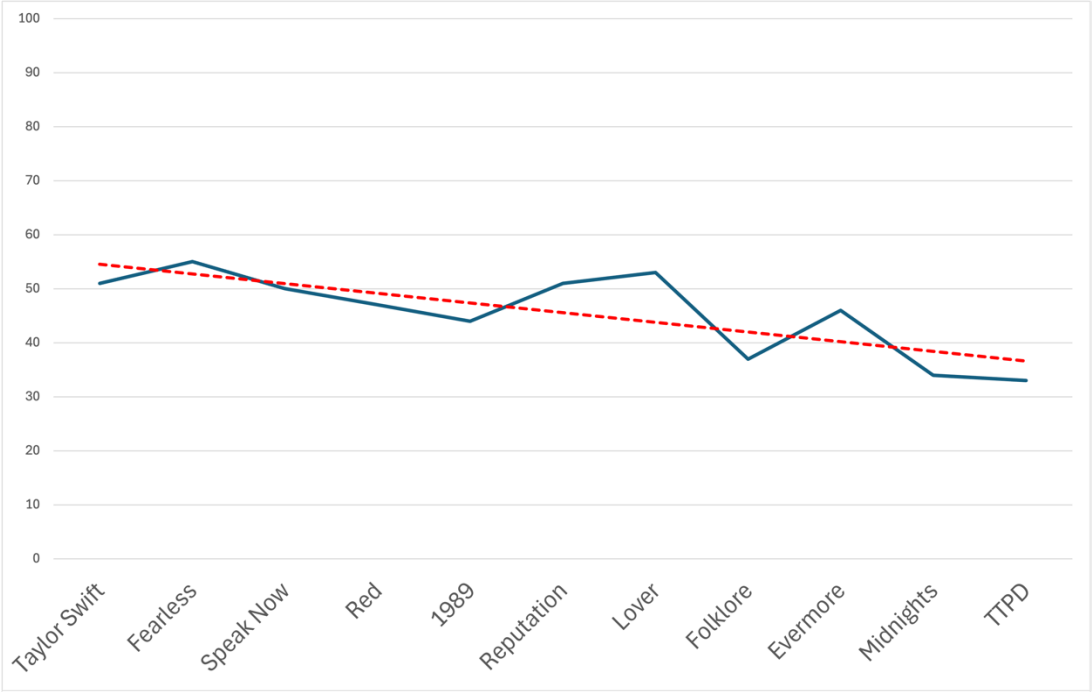

Figure 4
Evolution of sentiment in Taylor Swift's discography.

There are, however, some mismatches between emotions and semantic orientation in these albums. The LP *Taylor Swift*, which presented sadness as its first emotion, is classified by Lingmotif as slightly positive (TSS: 51). *Fearless* and *Speak Now*, which had love as their main emotion, are classified by Lingmotif as only fairly positive (TSS: 55) and neutral (TSS: 50), correspondingly. *Red*, the album with the highest proportion of sadness, is categorized as only slightly negative (TSS: 47). Bearing in mind the difference in emotions between these four albums, one would expect them to present a higher degree of variation in terms of semantic orientation. Although these results could be explained by the fact that sadness is still part of the three main emotions in most of these albums, the case of *1989*, where love is actually followed by joy, refutes this theory, as it was still classified as fairly negative (TSS: 44). *Reputation* and *Lover*, the two albums with the highest proportion of love, are categorized as only slightly positive. Therefore, it seems that the proportion of a particular positive or negative emotion is not directly proportional to the polarity.

What these mismatches suggest is that there is not a correlation between certain emotions and a higher presence of sentiment-laden words, whether positive or negative. This is especially true of love. Although we tend to categorize love as a positive emotion, the actual sentiment may be positive or negative depending on the words that contextualize this emotion. Furthermore, this contextualization and modulation of the love emotion materializes as mechanisms other than sentiment-laden lexical items.

Rhetorical devices also play an important role, as examples (7)-(8) below illustrate. These two instances, extracted from the albums *Fearless* and *Speak Now*, show how Swift often expresses feelings such as falling in love without any other positive words, thus leading the sentiment analysis system to classify such verses as neutral.

(7) He knelt to the ground and pulled out a ring / And said, marry me, Juliet / You'll never have to be alone (Love Story)

(8) You said, "I'll never leave you alone" / You said, "I remember how we felt sitting by the water / And every time I look at you it's like the first time" (Mine)

The *Red* album, characterized by the presence of themes such as sadness and heartbreak, also presents verses that escape lexical sentiment analysis systems because of the absence of negative sentiment words. Example (10) shows Swift recalling a relationship that she cannot move on from; however, she expresses this without using negative terms.

(9) Remembering him comes in flashbacks and echoes / Tell myself it's time now, gotta let go / But moving on from him is impossible / When I still see it all in my head / In burning red (Red)

The case of the album *Midnights* is especially interesting, as it was classified by Lingmotif as fairly negative (TSS: 34), although its main emotion is love. Once again, this discrepancy can be attributed to the actual lack of sentiment words on Swift's lyrics. Example (10) shows how Swift expresses that she is infatuated with her lover through the 1950s expression "lavender haze", which means to be in the early stages of falling in love. Nonetheless, this was classified as negative due to the presence of terms such as "haze", "damn", and "shit". Example (11), on the other hand, is an excerpt that was categorized as neutral because no sentiment words were found, even though Swift expresses the feeling of falling in love.

(10) I feel the lavender haze creeping up on me / Surreal, I'm damned if I do give a damn what people say / No deal, the 1950s shit they want from me / I just want to stay in that lavender haze (Lavender Haze)
(11) I do not even dare to wish it / But your eyes are flying saucers from another planet / Now I am all for you like Janet / Can this be a real thing? Can it? / Are we falling like snow at the beach? (Snow on the Beach)

4. Conclusions

Swift's discography shows a dynamic emotional landscape, with love and sadness at the forefront throughout most of her work. While these two emotions tend to accompany each other, the balance between them changes from album to album, thus showing that each era has a different focus: from heartache in *Taylor Swift*, to the more complex emotional combinations of *Reputation* and *Lover*, which incorporate fear and anger into her narrative, yet maintain love as a central theme. In her latest release, however, Swift breaks away from her established emotional formula, placing anger at the forefront for the first time, perhaps hinting at a new direction in her artistic expression.

On the other hand, the sentiment analysis reveals a moderate yet distinctly negative sentiment score, coupled with high intensity. This dynamic is aligned with the introspective themes prevalent in her lyrics, particularly as she focuses on her personal life experiences. Moreover, a shift in sentiment emerges across her albums, marking a trend toward increasingly negative sentiment from *Folklore* onwards. This evolution suggests that her work is transitioning towards a deeper exploration of complex, sometimes darker emotional states.

Finally, a significant mismatch was revealed between the emotions conveyed in her lyrics and the classification of those emotions based on sentiment words. While one might expect albums with a higher proportion of emotions like love or sadness to align more closely with positive or negative sentiment scores, the findings paint a different picture. For example, albums like *1989* and *Reputation*, where love predominates, were classified as fairly negative or slightly positive, suggesting a disconnect between emotions and lexical choices. Swift's lyrical style often expresses deep emotions such as sadness, love, and anger without relying on explicit positive or negative terms. Instead, her use of rhetorical devices and subtle language choices results in verses being classified as neutral, despite conveying clear emotional depth. This suggests that emotion in music cannot always be measured by the frequency of sentiment words, as demonstrated in the lyrics of albums such as *Fearless*, *Speak Now*, *Red*, or *Midnights*. This is in accordance with previous findings by Du (2024), whose study showed that music often conveys complex emotions that sentiment classifiers struggle to quantify accurately. Ultimately, Swift's discography illustrates the complexity of expressing human emotions, showing that meaning is often embedded in more nuanced and implicit forms of language. This suggests, as put forward by Du (2024) and Choi *et al*. (2018), that while sentiment analysis is a useful tool, it is perhaps insufficient to fully capture the depth of the emotional storytelling in music. Swift's lyrics precisely exemplify this, as their emotional richness often contrasts with how sentiment classification systems categorize them. In this sense, emotion in music might be more exhaustively studied if we considered the implicit and complex ways in

which artists such as Swift convey meaning through language.

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THE GRAMMAR OF DISSENT
Green Day's evolving critique of American society

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Abstract – This research explores the intersection of music, language, and social critique through a linguistic analysis of the American punk rock band Green Day. While music and lyrics are powerful tools for expressing cultural and political ideologies, the punk rock genre is particularly notable for its historically anti-establishment and anti-authoritarian themes. As one of the most commercially successful punk bands, Green Day has brought this tradition of dissent to a mainstream audience, crafting lyrics that capture the anxieties and frustrations of American society. This paper utilises Corpus Linguistics (CL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as methodological frameworks to examine the evolution of Green Day's social commentary throughout their discography. By analysing the thematic focus, rhetorical strategies, and linguistic choices in their lyrics—from their early work in the late 20th century to their more recent releases—this study traces how the band's critique of American society has shifted and adapted over time. The analysis aims to reveal how a popular music artist can both reflect and shape broader socio-political discourses, offering insights into the dynamic relationship between popular culture, language, and ideology.

Keywords: corpus linguistics; critical discourse analysis; social critique; punk rock; Green Day.

1. Introduction

Music and language are fundamentally interconnected in human cognition and social practice (Kegerreis 2019; Rieb 2018). Both operate as structured semiotic systems capable of expressing emotion, narrating experience, and shaping perceptions of the world (Ulfha *et al*. 2023). Song lyrics, in particular, are a rich form of discourse and intentional linguistic constructs that participate in the production and circulation of ideologies, social critique, and cultural identity (Fathoni *et al*. 2023; Susanti 2016; Visser 2023). Consequently, the analysis of lyrics is of great interest to the field of applied

[1] This paper was conceived and written jointly by the two authors. The individual contributions are identified as follows: Stefania M. Maci wrote Sections 1 (Introduction), 2 (Literature review), 4.1 (CL Analysis) and 5 (Conclusions). Silvia Bertulezzi wrote Section 3 (Methodology), under the supervision of Stefania M. Maci; Section 4.2 (Sentiment analysis) was conceived by Silvia Bertulezzi and jointly written by both authors.

linguistics, as it illuminates how language functions in cultural artifacts that are both widely consumed and emotionally resonant (Flowerdew, Richardson 2017).

A musical genre that offers fertile ground for this type of inquiry is punk rock. Since its emergence in the mid-1970s, punk has functioned as an oppositional cultural force, expressing dissatisfaction with dominant political and economic systems (Adamson 2018; Ambrosch 2018). Its lyrical content often foregrounds anti-establishment themes, articulating anger, alienation, and a rejection of social conformity through an abrasive, direct style (Anttonen 2017; Tupot 2024). As observed by Regev (2007), the embeddedness of punk within national and global cultural politics renders it a significant site for understanding the interplay between popular music and ideology.

Among contemporary punk bands, Green Day has played a particularly influential role in translating punk's rebellious ethos to a mass audience. Green Day is an American rock band formed in Rodeo, California, in 1987, by Billie Joe Armstrong and Mike Dirnt. Their album *Dookie*, which is credited with reviving punk music, brought them widespread recognition in the mid-1990s. The group is well-known for its upbeat live performances and socially orientated songs. While maintaining a commercially accessible sound, the band has consistently used lyrics to critique American political life, corporate power, war, and generational malaise (Chen 2023; Greer *et al*. 2025). Their discography, spanning over three decades, offers a rich corpus for examining the evolution of musical dissent in the context of shifting sociopolitical landscapes.

One of the most effective approaches to studying punk rock lyrics is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), especially when coupled with Corpus Linguistics (CL). This integrated methodology enables researchers to systematically examine linguistic patterns in large bodies of text while critically interpreting how these patterns relate to structures of power, ideology, and resistance (Alconada 2022; Bonsu 2025). Unlike purely structural analyses, CDA situates linguistic choices within broader sociopolitical contexts, attending to how meaning is produced, legitimized, or contested through language (Shea *et al*. 2024; Wilcox 2022).

This research will conduct a corpus-based critical discourse analysis of Green Day's criticism of American society to see the extent to which, if any, it has changed over time, using the 2004 album *American Idiot* as a pivotal reference point. Rather than surveying the entire discography evenly, the analysis is structured to explore the band's lyrical content before and after *American Idiot*, treating the album as a cultural and political watershed. Through this comparative approach, the research seeks to illuminate how the band's discursive strategies evolved in response to transformations in U.S. society, especially in the context of post-9/11 politics, the Iraq War, and the

increasing commodification of punk sensibilities. By situating *American Idiot* within a broader timeline of Green Day's work, this paper offers a nuanced understanding of how punk rock music both reflects and reshapes public discourse.

Accordingly, this study is structured as follows: after the present *Introduction* and the *Literature Review* in Section 2, the methodological framework is outlined in Section 3. The analysis and interpretation of the data are presented in Section 4, while the main findings and their implications are discussed in the *Conclusions* (Section 5).

2. Literature Review

Research across disciplines has explored the cognitive, cultural, and communicative parallels between language and music. As early as the 1960s, scholars examined how music creates meaning through patterns of social expectations (Meyer 1961). Lomax (1978) argued that musical form reflects broader cultural and cognitive structures, suggesting a deep-rooted connection between expressive systems and the societies that produce them. Building on this foundation, Patel and Patel (2010) argue that both the language and music domains share hierarchical, temporal, and syntactic structures, making them equally potent in expressing ideology and identity. Not only is popular music a 'semiotic resource' through which language, sound, and visuals interact to construct social meaning (Machin, van Leeuwen 2016), but also its musical structures and lyrics co-construct meaning, especially within genres that foreground cultural resistance such as punk, hip hop, or protest folk (Machin 2010; Tagg 2012). Within this paradigm, song lyrics become tools for encoding ideologies and challenging dominant discourses. This process is especially evident in genres like punk, where the sonic texture and lyric linguistic style do not merely reflect who we are (Hall and du Gay 1996) but rather serve as powerful tools for expressing marginality, dissent, and subcultural belonging. In this way, musical texts function not just as vehicles of artistic expression but as ideological sites where identities are claimed, contested, and mediated, through specific textual and performative strategies, including lexical choices, narrative stance, and intertextual reference (Moore 2002).

From its inception, punk rock has been analysed as a discursive rebellion against hegemonic structures but also as a semiotic disturbance, where language, fashion, and music coalesced into symbolic resistance (Hebdige 1979), whose linguistic performance constructs authenticity and political stance (Bennett 2001; Tupot 2024). Within punk, the raw, direct language often found in lyrics works to authenticate the speaker's position and to challenge dominant social narratives. Punk lyrics are specifically a

performative dissent genre, which highlights how linguistic defiance becomes a marker of subcultural legitimacy (Ambrosch 2018).

These frameworks are central to the analysis of the punk band Green Day's lyrical and discursive evolution, before and after their successful album *American Idiot*. Green Day remains a focal point in debates on authenticity vs. commodification in punk, given that the band has evolved from subcultural rage into mainstream critique by utilising strategic and accessible linguistic structures to broaden political messages without abandoning punk's core ethos (Ensminger 2011). By combining narrative with intertextual references to war, media, and surveillance, Green Day recontextualizes punk tropes (e.g., marginalization, institutional distrust) within a post-9/11 political landscape (Quail 2021) and constructs a mass-mediated dissent that maintains updated cultural and social relevance (De Loera 2024).

The identification of political and societal messages in punk rock lyrics can be realised through a CDA- and CL-based analysis. While CDA provides the theoretical foundation (Fairclough 1995, 2014), Corpus Linguistics (CL) offers replicable tools, detecting patterns of lexical and grammatical usage across datasets. Baker (2023) claims that corpus tools allow for a bottom-up discovery of ideology through quantitative analysis, an approach increasingly used in song lyric research (Motschenbacher 2016; Muhammad *et al*. 2022). In addition, Partington *et al*. (2013) further explain how corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS) can uncover evaluative clusters (e.g., words of anger, dissent, or satire) that carry ideological weight in music. In punk and protest genres, these tools help trace how resistance is linguistically framed over time. Together, CDA and CL not only expose how Green Day crafts dissent through language but also demonstrate the band's role in shaping and sustaining a linguistically mediated politics of resistance in popular culture.

3. Methodology

To investigate changes in Green Day's lyrical discourse over time, we selected some of their albums and compiled three distinct corpora reflecting the pre-, during-, and post-*American Idiot* periods. *American Idiot* (2004) is central to Green Day's career and delineates a *before* and an *after* because not only does it mark a critical and commercial turning point for the band, but also signals a deepening of the band's engagement with political discourse and social critique.

The albums selected for the pre- and post-*American Idiot* periods have been based on commercial relevance, as measured by aggregated streaming

and sales data from Kworb.net,[2] a centralized platform for music chart statistics. Accordingly, three corpora have been constructed to reflect three distinct phases of the band's artistic and political trajectory: the *Pre–American Idiot* (PrAI) corpus, the *American Idiot* (AI) corpus, and the *Post–American Idiot* (PoAI) corpus.

The PrAI corpus includes two of Green Day's most influential early albums: *Dookie* (1994) and *Nimrod* (1997). The album *Dookie* (1994) consists of 14 songs[3] and is widely regarded as Green Day's mainstream breakthrough, characterized by themes of disaffection, alienation, and suburban boredom, delivered through concise, emotionally raw lyrics. The album *Nimrod* (1997) comprises 18 songs[4] and exhibits a broader stylistic and thematic range than its predecessor, incorporating elements of experimentation while retaining Green Day's trademark irreverence and cynicism. Together, the PrAI corpus spans a total of 32 songs (1,031 types; 6,521 tokens), offering a linguistic snapshot of the band's formative years.

At the centre of this study lies *American Idiot* (2004), which serves as the critical turning point in the band's sociopolitical discourse. This concept album, often described as a punk rock opera, contains 9 songs[5] (807 types; 3,973 tokens). This album is explicitly political, offering a sustained critique of American consumerism, media culture, and foreign policy in the early 2000s. Its centrality in the corpus reflects both its thematic density and its pivotal role in shaping the band's subsequent ideological orientation.

The PoAI corpus encompasses Green Day's later work following the political and stylistic turning point marked by *American Idiot*. This corpus includes two albums: *21st Century Breakdown* (2009) and *Revolution Radio* (2016). *21st Century Breakdown* contributes with 18 songs,[6] and builds upon the rock-opera structure introduced in *American Idiot*, presenting a wide-

[2] Kworb.net is a website that aggregates and tracks music data, providing charts for various platforms like iTunes, Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube (available at Kworb.net)

[3] The songs of the album *Dookie* are *Burnout*; *Having a Blast*; *Chump*; *Longview*; *Welcome to Paradise*; *Pulling Teeth*; *Basket Case*; *She*; *Sassafras Roots*; *When I Come Around*; *Coming Clean*; *Emenius Sleepus*; *In the End: F.O.D.*

[4] The songs included in *Nimrod* are *Nice Guys Finish Last*; *Hitchin' a Ride*; *The Grouch*; *Redundant*; *Scattered*; *All the Time*; *Worry Rock*; *Platypus (I Hate You)*; *Uptight*; *Last Ride In*; *Jinx*; *Haushinka*; *Walking Alone*; *Reject*; *Take Back*; *King for a Day*; *Good Riddance (Time of Your Life)*; *Prosthetic Head*; *All By Myself* (hidden track).

[5] The songs included in *American Idiot* are: *American Idiot*; *Jesus of Suburbia*; *Holiday*; *Boulevard of Broken Dreams*; *Are We the Waiting*; *St. Jimmy*; *Give Me Novacaine*; *She's a Rebel*; *Extraordinary Girl*; *Letterbomb*; *Wake Me Up When September Ends*; *Homecoming*; *Whatsername*.

[6] The album includes the following songs: *Song of the Century*; *21st Century Breakdown*; *Know Your Enemy*; *¡Viva la Gloria!*; *Before the Lobotomy*; *Christian's Inferno*; *Last Night on Earth*; *East Jesus Nowhere*; *Peacemaker*; *Last of the American Girls*; *Murder City*; *¿Viva la Gloria? (Little Girl)*; *Restless Heart Syndrome*; *Horseshoes and Handgrenades*; *The Static Age*; *21 Guns*; *American Eulogy (A. Mass Hysteria, B. Modern World)*; *See the Light*.

ranging critique of contemporary American life through its narrative arc and varied personas. *Revolution Radio* contains 12 songs[7] and offers a grounded and urgent reflection on violence, media saturation, and social anxiety in 21st-century America. Together, these two albums provide a comprehensive view of the band's continued engagement with themes of personal identity, political frustration, and cultural resistance in the aftermath of their mainstream reinvention. Overall, the corpus consists of 30 songs (1,333 types, 7,798 tokens). A breakdown of the three corpora can be seen in Table 1:

Corpus	**Types**	**Tokens**	**TTR**
Pre *American Idiot* (PrAI)	1,031	6,521	0.16
American Idiot (AI)	807	3,973	0.20
Post American Idiot (PoAI)	1,333	7,798	0.17

Table 1
Corpora breakdown.

All the lyrics forming our three corpora were sourced from publicly available online platforms, initially copied from Google results and then verified through physical CD booklets, where available, and Genius.com,[8] a curated and community-annotated lyrics database.

To prepare the data for sentiment analysis, three separate `.txt` files were compiled and manually reviewed to ensure transcription accuracy. Following this quality check, the texts underwent a standard pre-processing phase using the *spaCy*[9] natural language processing library in Python.[10] Pre-processing involved several standard steps aimed at minimising orthographic variation and optimising the data for computational analysis. For this reason, all texts were converted to lowercase to ensure case-insensitive comparisons, punctuation was removed to reduce noise,[11] and the texts were tokenised.[12]

[7] The songs of the album *Revolution Radio* are: *Somewhere Now*; *Bang Bang*; *Revolution Radio*; *Say Goodbye*; *Outlaws*; *Bouncing Off the Wall*; *Still Breathing*; *Youngblood*; *Too Dumb to Die*; *Troubled Times*; *Forever Now*; *Ordinary World*.

[8] Genius.com is the world's biggest music encyclopaedia with a community of more than two million contributors where to discuss and deconstruct all aspects in music (available at: genius.com).

[9] *SpaCy* is an open-source library for advanced natural language processing in Python, designed specifically for efficiency and industrial-level NLP tasks (available at: https://spacy.io).

[10] Python is an open source high-level programming language with dynamic semantics (available at https://www.python.org/).

[11] Noise is unstructured, meaningless data produced in the batch process of data collection that is responsible for errors in the linguistic analysis (Wang *et al.* 1995; Wright 2024).

[12] In Natural Language Processing, tokenization is the process of breaking down text into smaller units called tokens, making it easier for computers to process (https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/t okenization).

Function words[13] were retained due to their relevance in the lyrical and rhetorical structure—particularly personal pronouns and auxiliary verbs, which are often semantically loaded in musical texts and contribute significantly to the expressive and evaluative dimensions of lyrics (Sufah 2024). These procedures are widely adopted in corpus-based sentiment analysis, as they help standardise input data and improve the robustness of subsequent lexical and semantic evaluations.

We uploaded the corpora into CorpusSense[14] to identify recurring lexical patterns; for this purpose, we generated word frequency lists for each corpus and focused on the top 20 most frequent words. While raw frequency alone does not guarantee semantic salience or discourse significance (Stubbs 2001), it served as an initial heuristic for identifying potentially dominant themes. Building on this, we extracted keywords and key terms[15] and compared the results across the three corpora to capture corpus-specific lexico-semantic features, shedding light on what distinguishes one Green Day's phase from the others in terms of discourse construction and thematic emphasis. Keywords were further examined through concordance analysis to explore their function in immediate context (co-text) and broader socio-discursive context. This step facilitated a CDA-informed reading, assessing how the lyrics construct meaning and critique. This approach enabled us to identify both specific patterns common to all three corpora and, if present, diachronic shifts in style specific to each corpus, offering a richer and more nuanced account of lexical salience and thematic evolution over time.

As the wordlist thus created raised the awareness of the extremely frequent recurrence of negative forms, particularly modal and auxiliary negation such as *don't*, *can't*, and *not*, we decided to carry out a more targeted investigation into the emotional and attitudinal tone of the lyrics through sentiment analysis. Conducted using *R*,[16] sentiment analysis allowed

[13] Function words are words that have no independent meaning. They are used to establish relations between the different parts of speech in sentences (cf. Freeborn 1995).

[14] CorpusSense is an open access software used for corpus query and analysis designed for the exploration of large language datasets through a combination of statistical and linguistic techniques using Python (Moreno-Ortiz 2024b). The range of functionalities offered by CorpusSense facilitates both quantitative and qualitative textual analysis, including the generation of frequency lists, keyword extraction, collocations, colligations and semantic analysis (available at: https://corpus-sense.uma.es/).

[15] As aptly claimed by Moreno-Ortiz (2024a), the notion of *keywords* as unusually frequent words statistically computed against a reference corpus (cf. Baker 2023) creates some problems given that keyword extraction depends on the type of the reference corpus selected by the researcher. For this reason, Corpus Sense adopts an advanced topic model, such as BERTtopic, which is "capable of automatically distilling the relevant themes of a corpus, rank them by relevance, and list the keywords associated with each topic" (Moreno-Ortiz 2024a, p. 183).

[16] R is an open access software environment for statistical computing, well-suited for text mining and natural language processing (available at: https://www.r-project.org/).

us to move beyond surface lexical patterns and assess the evaluative polarity embedded in the lyrics across albums. In this way, sentiment analysis served as a triangulation method to capture affective trends and shifts that would not have emerged from structural frequency-based techniques alone.

Each corpus was segmented into units of four lines, approximating the average stanza length in song lyrics, to allow for manageable and contextually coherent sentiment units. Sentiment scores were computed using multiple tools to allow for comparative interpretation and methodological triangulation. First, the *Afinn lexicon* (Rinker 2021),[17] which assigns polarity scores on a scale from -5 (strongly negative) to +5 (strongly positive), was employed to capture sentiment strength in a straightforward and computationally efficient manner. This was complemented with the `sentimentr` package[18] (Rinker 2021), which calculates sentiment at the sentence level and integrates contextual valence modification (e.g., negation, intensifiers, adversative structures). This allowed for a more nuanced assessment of evaluative tone, particularly in lyrics where affective expression is shaped by subtle grammatical cues.

The combination of a basic polarity model and a more context-sensitive metric provided a basis for evaluating not just the emotional direction but also the complexity and intensity of sentiment across albums. This layered methodological approach, integrating frequency-based, sentiment-based, and discourse-analytic techniques, offers a multi-dimensional perspective on how Green Day's lyrics evolve over time. The use of computational tools such as *spaCy*, *CorpusSense* and *R* enables large-scale data processing, while qualitative interpretation anchors these findings in broader ideological and stylistic developments. In doing so, the analysis captures both macro-level patterns and micro-level textual strategies in the band's shifting critique of American society.

4. Data analysis

4.1. CL Analysis

4.1.1. The PrAI corpus

The list of keyword expressions of the PrAI corpus and extracted with CorpusSense can be seen in the cloud form in Figure 1.

[17] *Afinn lexicon* is a sentiment analysis resource developed by Nielsen (2011) that assigns numerical valence scores to individual words to indicate their emotional orientation.

[18] The sentimentr package is a library for R designed to perform sentiment analysis with greater sensitivity to linguistic context than simple polarity dictionaries.

Figure 1
Keyword cloud of the PrAI corpus.

For the purpose of this contribution, we will focus on the three top keyword expressions only. This selective approach, prompted by the word count constraints, allows for a more in-depth discussion of the most salient patterns emerging from the data.

As can be seen, size and colour visually represent the keyword composite score (CompScore) given by the combination of frequency and keyness score (Moreno-Ortiz 2024a). The most evident keyword expressions are *your time* (19 hits; CompScore 0.5075), *hell* (10 hits; CompScore 0.3142) and *time* (9 hits; CompScore 0.5817).

Time usually collocates with *your time* which generally appears together with *wasting* or *waste* in expressions such as *wasting your time*; *wasting your time?*, or *may I waste your time?*. These keyword expressions mainly appear in the song *Assafras Roots* and act both as an accusation (*So why are you alone wasting your time?)* and a self-deprecating reflection:

(1) Well, I'm a waste like you
With nothin' else to do
May I waste your time too?
Warding off regrets, wasting your time
Smoking cigarettes, wasting your time
I'm just a parasite wasting your time
Applying myself to wasting your time

In the songs, the keyword *time* thus works as a metaphor for futility, aligning with the notions of waste, loss and immobility. As the keyword expression *wasting your time* is also used as a rhetorical question, it enhances the tone of existential loss, doubt and passive rebellion. The term clearly points to a critique of conformity and inertia and seems to be the expression of youthful

disillusionment, creating the identity of a marginal, drifting and disaffected persona.

Hell is a keyword recurring in various songs, as, for instance, in *Burnout*, *Longview*, *Pulling Teeth*, *F.O.D*, etc. It typically appears in emphatic expressions such as *Sure as hell* or *Go to hell.* As an intensifier, it carries an emotive and evaluative force and aligns with an anti-authoritarian stance, reflecting a rejection of normative morality and an aggressive stance towards institutions, also in consideration of the band's ideological positioning as expressed in some interviews (CBS Morning 2024).

4.1.2. The AI corpus

The top three keyword expressions of the AI corpus are *September* (22 hits; CompScore 0.66), *a rebel* (13 hits CompScore 0.20) and *suburbia* (6 hits; CompScore 0.17), as can be seen in the cloud depicted in Figure 2 below.

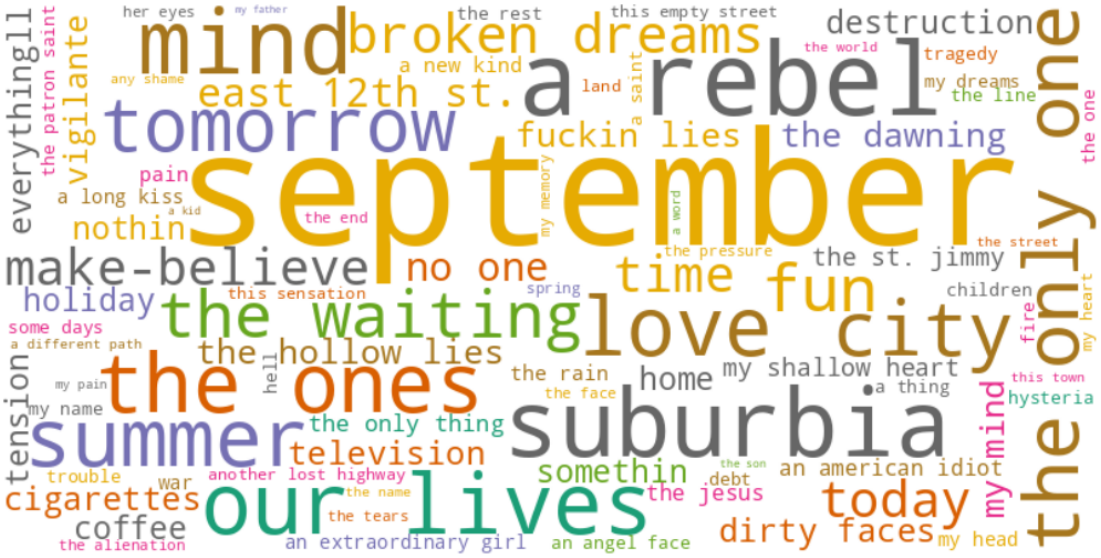

Figure 2
Keyword cloud of the AI corpus.

September is mainly found in *Wake Me Up When September Ends* across multiple lines:

(2) Summer has come and passed
The innocent can never last
Wake me up when September ends
Like my father's come to pass
Seven years has gone so fast
Wake me up when September ends

September can symbolically be read as referring to the social context of the time. *American Idiot* was composed during the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attack, which resulted in the *war on terror*, spanning into multiple wars, including the Iraq War (2003-2011). The term, therefore, metonymically functions as trauma as well as temporal transition, as indicated by the use of the temporal deixis ("summer has passed") and natural imagery ("rain"), whih seems to encode melancholy:

(3) Here comes the rain again
Falling from the stars
Drenched in my pain again
Becoming who we are
As my memory rests
But never forgets what I lost
Wake me up when September ends

It seems, therefore a mourning elegy encapsulating the emotional landscape of the 9/11 aftermath in an introspective counterpoint, as clearly revealed in the band's official video of the song (Green Day 2009).

A rebel, particularly found in the song *She's a Rebel* and, as a noun, juxtaposed with "saint", "vigilante", and "dangerous", is thematically associated with the idea of opposition defiance and identity:

(4) She sings the revolution
The dawning of our lives
She brings this liberation
That I just can't define
Well, nothin' comes to mind

The keyword *suburbia*, seems the leitmotiv in the album *American Idiot*, and constructs the protagonist, Jesus of Suburbia, as the product of cultural emptiness and consumerist monotony as can be seen in the song *Jesus of Suburbia*:

(5) I'm the son of rage and love
The Jesus of Suburbia
The bible of "none of the above"
On a steady diet of
Soda pop and Ritalin

In this sense, is seems to metonymically represent the American middle-class experience considered by the band as emotionally sterile, political apathetic and spiritual vacant.

4.1.3. The PoAI corpus

The top three keyword expressions of the PoAI corpus are *the modern world* (22 hits; CompScore 0.02), *outlaws* (15 hits CompScore 0.03) and *troubled times* (11 hits; CompScore 0.13), as can be seen in the cloud depicted in Figure 3 below.

Among the most prominent keyword expressions in the Post-American Idiot (PoAI) corpus, *the modern world* recurs in multiple tracks, particularly *Troubled Times* and *Somewhere Now*, where it encapsulates a complex and ambivalent representation of contemporary life and existential confusion:

(6) I've lost my patience with the world today
The modern world is not so bad
The modern world is all I've had

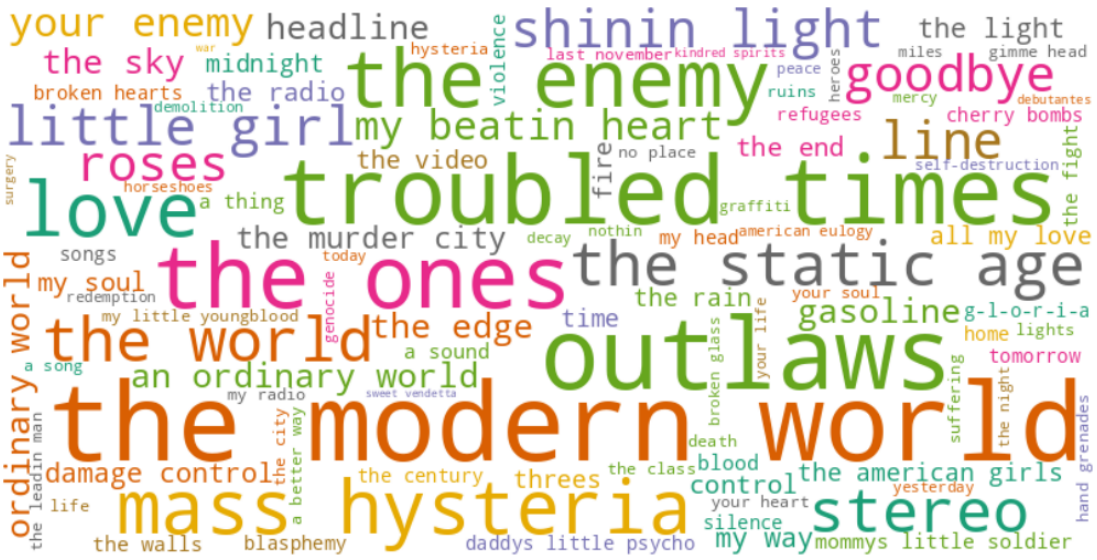

Figure 3
Keyword cloud of the PoAI corpus.

Linguistically, the phrase *the modern world* seems to functions as a metonym for current sociopolitical conditions, encompassing themes of digital oversaturation, existential inertia, and cultural disorientation. Indeed, the first line "I lost my patience with the world today" is counterclaimed by the second one "the modern world is not so bad", which implies the subject can nevertheless see positivity in the world, even though they lost their patience with it. However, the third line introduces resignation in accepting this world: "The modern world is all I've had", a further counterstatement to the second line. In this sense, its contextual use comes along with a tone of resigned critique or existential weariness, reflecting a shift toward disillusionment without clear revolution.

The second key term, *outlaws*, appears primarily in the song *Outlaws*

and is consistently associated with images of romantic misfits, emotional fugitives, and nonconformist identities, as can be seen in excerpt (7) taken from *Outlaws*.

(7) First love
First forgiveness
We were delinquents
Freaks of a fading memory

Outlaws

Unlike traditional formulations of deviance or rebellion, the term *outlaws* here assumes a nostalgic and almost redemptive quality. Linguistically, the term denotes marginality but is stripped of violent or threatening connotations, instead of evoking intimacy and vulnerability. Its semantic field includes affective states such as longing and loss, positioning the outlaw as a figure of existential resistance rather than ideological confrontation. As such, it seems to propose the band's generational shift who no longer shout in anger (as in *American idiot*) but sing in longing for meaning and connection, as seen in excerpt (8), where the youthful rebellion (*Outlaws, when we were forever young / When we were outlaws / We're outlaws of redemption, baby*):

(8) I've got no supervision
Nothin' will change my spirit's place to roam
I'll plead my innocence, I'll plead my innocence
But that's my best defense when you are young
Outlaws, when we were forever young
When we were outlaws
We're outlaws of redemption, baby
Hooligans, we destroyed suburbia
When we were outlaws
We're outlaws of forever

The final keyword, *troubled times*, appears prominently in the track *Troubled Times* and functions as a temporal and thematic anchoring the band's reflection within a post-truth, post-hope global context:

(9) What good is love and peace on Earth
When it's exclusive?
In these troubled times, I feel alone
Where's the truth in the written word
If no one reads it?

As a collocation, the phrase is highly conventional and resonates with both media discourse and public rhetoric concerning crisis (as seen in excerpt (9) above or in the line *What part of history we've learned / When it's*

repeated?). However, its use in the Green Day corpus acquires a more introspective dimension. Rather than framing political events or collective unrest in concrete terms, *troubled times* is employed to index emotional isolation, uncertainty, and despair:

(10) That good is love and peace on Earth
When it's exclusive?
Where's the truth in the written word
If no one reads it?

A new day dawning
Comes without warning
So don't think twice

We live in troubled times (Ah-ah, ah-ah)
We live in troubled times (Ah-ah, ah-ah)

As can be seen in excerpts (9) and (10), the expression is often embedded within declaratives that reinforce a tone of helplessness or emotional fatigue, serving less as a critique of external conditions and more as a lament.

4.2. Sentiment analysis

4.2.1. The PreAI corpus

The visualisations below present the sentiment analysis results for the Pre-*American Idiot* corpus, using both the *Afinn* lexicon and the `sentimentr` package (Figure 4). The plot displays sentiment scores calculated with *Afinn*, showing a general skew toward negative values. Two clusters of pronounced negativity are particularly notable. The first, located just before index 200, corresponds to a section of lyrics that articulate disillusionment with societal norms and the loss of youthful ideals, reflecting anger toward a world perceived as corruptive and dehumanising:

(11) Everyone's so full of shit
Born and raised by hypocrites
Hearts recycled, but never saved
From the cradle to the grave
We are the kids of war and peace
From Anaheim to the Middle East
We are the stories and disciples of
The Jesus of Suburbia

The second and more extreme peak occurs just after index 250 and is attributable to *Platypus (I Hate You)* from *Nimrod*, a song marked by overt aggression and profane, explicitly hateful language, which is reflected in its

sharp negative sentiment score.

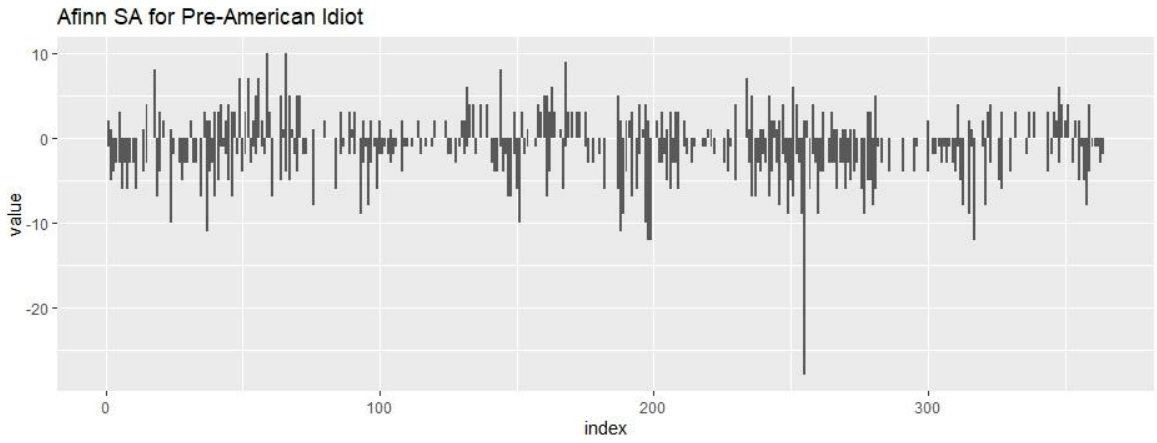

Figure 4
Afinn sentiment analysis of the Prai corpus. Negative score -882. Positive score +440.

Despite the general negative sentiment emerging from the *Afinn* analysis, several positive peaks in the positive range (+5 to +10) appear, particularly in the first half and middle section of the plot, notably between indices 50 and 120. However, a closer inspection reveals that these are false positives, as they occur in contexts where positively connoted terms are semantically or pragmatically negated by their co-text. The first instance of this phenomenon appears at index 15-18, corresponding to *Having a Blast*. Here, expressions such as (emphasis added) "I don't *care*," "*kiss* yourself goodbye," and "I'm losing all *happiness*" contain terms such as "care," "kiss," and "happiness," which are typically associated with positive affect. Nevertheless, these terms are clearly embedded in a pessimistic and detached discourse, thereby subverting presumed positivity. A second example appears in *Welcome to Paradise* (indices 52-60). Again, while certain lexical items may trigger positive sentiment analysis, their discursive framing is distinctively sarcastic and critical. The refrain "Some call it slums, some call it *nice* / I want to take you through a wasteland, I like to call my *home* / Welcome to *paradise*" highlights the contrast between superficial positivity (*nice*) and the reality of the urban decay (*slums*, *wasteland*), rendering positive evaluation hollow. A third peak, around indices 64-66, aligns with *Pulling Teeth*. Although positive terms are present (*love*, *takes good care of me*), they follow a sequence of lines depicting an abusive relationship (*Is she ultra-violent? Is she disturbed?*). In this case, the sentiment score fails to account for the darkly sarcastic tone and the disturbing context of abusiveness, yielding to a false positive (emphasis added):

(12) Is she ultra-violent? Is she disturbed?
I *better* tell her that I *love* her
Before she does it all over again

Oh *God*, she's killing me!
For now, I'll lie around
Hell, that's all I can really do
She takes *good care* of me
Just keep saying my *love* is true

Another positive peak appears at index 144 in the track *Fuck Off And Die*. This peak is triggered by the term *fun*, which in context is not genuinely celebratory. The lyrics *When it's all said and done, it's real and it's been fun / But was it all real fun?* suggest a disenchanted, sarcastic use of "fun" that masks deeper feelings of disillusionment and misanthropy. A similar irony emerges later in the same song (indices 158–175), where the adjective *wonderful* in "*wonderful times*" is likewise to be interpreted sarcastically.

A particularly complex case occurs around indices 161–162, corresponding to the song *Nice Guys Finish Last*. The sentiment spike here is likely driven by the presence of lexical items such as *nice*, *sympathy*, *best*, *happy*, *joke*, and *funny*. However, these terms are embedded in a text that critiques the very values they represent. The song reflects a worldview in which kindness and vulnerability are not rewarded but penalised, and where emotional expression is treated with irony. The positive lexis is immediately undermined by the presence of terms like *worst*, *piss*, *pressure*, *insane*, *outcast*, and by metaphorical representations that evoke degradation and despair—e.g., *Do you feel washed up like piss going down the drain?* or *Don't pat yourself on the back / You might break your spine*. The passage articulates an ironic reflection on failure, alienation, and disaffection (emphasis added):

(13) *Nice* guys finish last
You're running out of gas
Your *sympathy* will get you left behind
Sometimes you're at your *best*
When you feel the worst
Do you feel washed up like piss going down the drain?
Pressure cooker, pick my brain and tell me I'm insane
I'm so fucking *happy* I could cry
Every *joke* can have its truth, but now the *joke*'s on you
I never knew you were such a *funny* guy
Oh, *nice* guys finish last
When you are the outcast
Don't pat yourself on the back
You might break your spine

The plot, generated with `sentimentr` (Figure 5), offers sentence-level sentiment scores and provides a more granular view of attitudinal polarity, with blue dots indicating positivity and red ones indicating negativity. Again, a general leaning toward negative sentiment is observable, with a dense

cluster of red and dark orange points below the zero line. The distribution corroborates the earlier *Afinn*-based findings but enhances interpretability by accounting for valence shifters and contextual nuance. While positive sentiment seems to be present, we have seen that it is a negation of positive sentiment, suggesting that the Green Day's early lyrical phase is characterised by a predominance of negative affective stance, particularly themes of anger, frustration, and alienation.

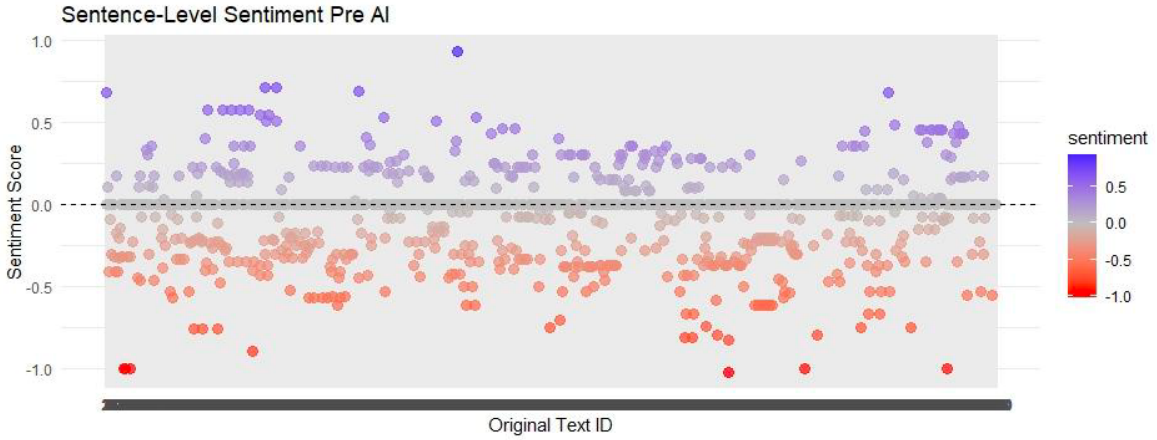

Figure 5
`sentimentr` analysis of the PrAI corpus.

4.2.2. The AI Corpus

The sentiment analysis for the *American Idiot* corpus reveals a continued tendency toward negative affect, particularly in the album's opening sections (Figure 6).

As shown in both the *Afinn*-based bar plot and the sentence-level visualisation from the `sentimentr` package (Figure 7 below), dense clusters of negative sentiment are especially prominent in the first third of the album. This aligns with the album's well-documented purpose: a politically charged commentary on early-2000s America, composed in the aftermath of 9/11 and during the Iraq War.

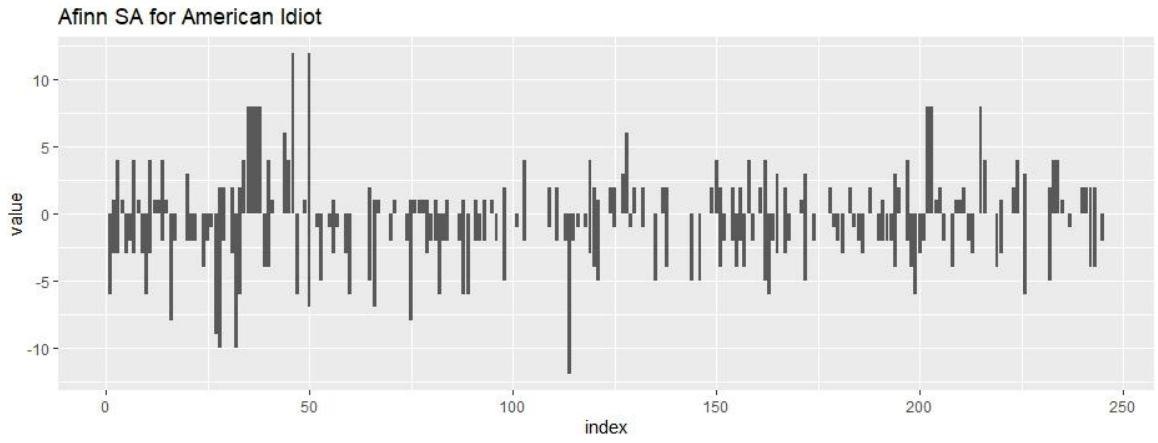

Figure 6.
Afinn sentiment analysis of the AI corpus. Negative score -393. Positive score +275.

The lexical choices, frequently characterised by anger, disillusionment, and social critique, carry an inherently negative valence, reflecting the ideological framing of the album as a punk-inflected dissent.

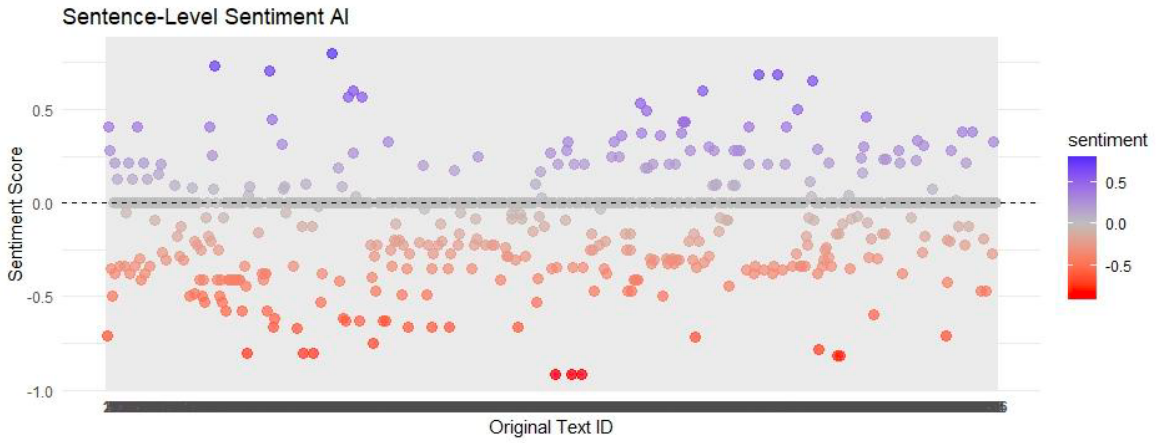

Figure 7
`sentimentr` analysis of the AI corpus.

A notable cluster of positive values appears shortly after the initial negative segments in the *Afinn* plot. However, this apparent positive shift is not confirmed in the `sentimentr` output. Upon closer inspection of the corresponding lyrics, it becomes evident that this is a false positive introduced by the *Afinn* lexicon: the word *care*, typically tagged as positive, appears in negated constructions, as in "don't care", which *Afinn* fails to register as negative due to its context-agnostic design. A similar discrepancy can be observed just after the 200-index mark, further reinforcing the need for context-sensitive approaches in affective textual analysis.

The most pronounced dip in sentiment occurs around index 115,

corresponding to the introduction of *St. Jimmy*, a key narrative figure in the album's punk-opera structure. This character's entry is marked by overtly aggressive and nihilistic language, which registers clearly as strongly negative across both sentiment models, highlighting the tonal shift and intensification of emotional volatility at this point in the album.

4.2.3. The PoAI Corpus

The sentiment analysis of the Post-*American Idiot* corpus reveals a shift in emotional expression when compared to the earlier lyrical phases of *Dookie*, *Nimrod*, and *American Idiot*.

As observed in both the *Afinn*-based bar plot and the sentence-level output from `sentimentr` (Figures 8 and 9), the overall sentiment appears to gravitate more consistently toward neutrality, with many values clustering around the zero line and fewer instances of extreme polarity.

The most prominent positive peak in the *Afinn* graph (Figure 8), which can also be observed in the `sentimentr` graph (Figure 9), immediately draws attention, but upon closer inspection, it reveals a false positive. The lyrics associated with this spike consist of a transcribed laughter found in *Christian's Inferno*, which the *Afinn* lexicon interprets as strongly positive.

Positioned immediately after the first stanza, the laughter acts as a disturbing emotional shift. Far from expressing amusement, it conveys a manic, deranged tone, that erupts when reality collapses into absurdity. The laughter therefore exemplifies affective dissonance, functioning as a semiotic trace of despair, a maniacal response to a disintegrating world order. Trapped in a "modern Hell," the singer feels violently rejected and overwhelmed. Images like "bitter pill… chased in blood" and "fire in my veins" express inner chaos, suggesting trauma, anger, and existential despair:

(14) I got under the grip between this modern Hell
I got the rejection letter in the mail and it was already ripped to shreds
Seasons in ruin and this bitter pill is chased in blood
There's fire in my veins and it's pouring out like a flood
Woah-oh, Christian's inferno
Woah-oh, Christian's inferno
Woah-oh, Christian's inferno
Woah-oh, Christian's inferno
Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha
Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha

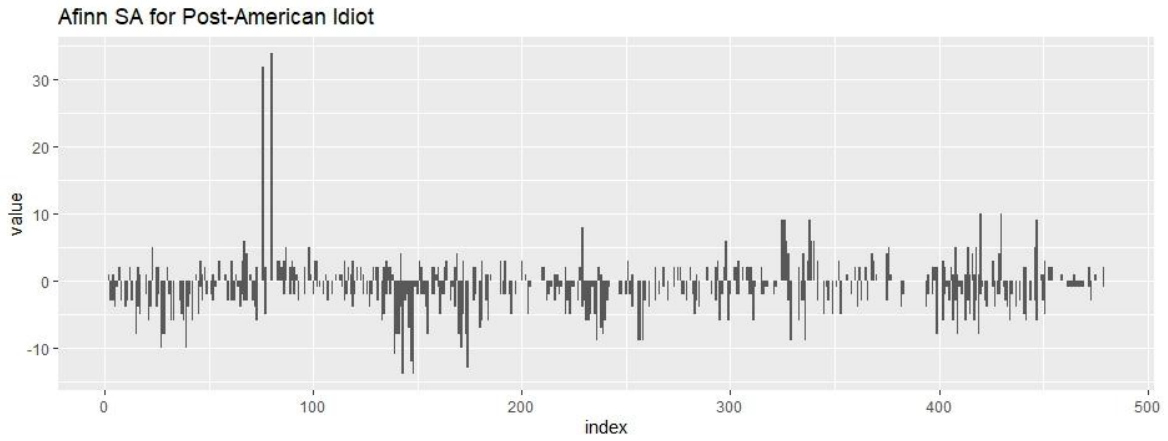

Figure 8
Afinn sentiment analysis of the PoAI corpus. Negative score -931. Positive score +502.

There are also other false positive phenomena. For instance, in *Bang Bang* (index 228), positivity is simply triggered by the preposition "like" which is purely used as a comparative marker. It carries no intrinsic sentiment and does not indicate genuine positivity. Furthermore, at indices 324–339, a cluster of positive sentiment can be observed, matching the song *Say goodbye*, which corresponds to the repeated use of the word *"*love*"* in the line *Say goodbye to the ones we love.* While *"love"* is lexically positive, its semantic orientation is negative, as it refers to mourning and loss, saying farewell to those who have died. In *Troubles Times*, at indices 420 and 429, the false positive peaks are caused by a rhetorical question that criticises social inequality: *What good is love and peace on Earth / When it's exclusive?* Although the terms *love* and *peace* are conventionally positive, their contextual framing is critical and ironic, highlighting the hypocrisy of values that are upheld only for the privileged few. The sentiment here is not celebratory but disillusioned and accusatory. At last, at index 446, corresponding to *Forever Now*, the line that triggers false positive sentiment is *If this is what you call the good life* [...] *I want a better way to die*. While the phrase *good life* is lexically positive, it is the overall tone that is clearly critical, expressing dissatisfaction with the current state of things.

A significant negative cluster appears between index 125 and 150, corresponding to a segment in *21st Century Breakdown* where the album's protagonist is discursively positioned within a narrative of hopelessness and existential erosion. The dense use of negatively loaded lexical items such as *pathetic*, *desperate*, and *helpless* marks a shift in the ideational content and interpersonal positioning of the speaker: the lyrics construct an individual increasingly alienated from agency and resistant to normative forms of empowerment. The affective stance here is not simply negative but ideologically saturated, foregrounding the singer's misalignment with narratives of self-determination.

Figure 9
`sentimentr` analysis of the PoAI corpus.

Toward the end of the corpus, primarily representing the final tracks of *Revolution Radio*, we observe a marked flattening of affect, as sentiment scores stabilise near the neutral line. This shift reconfigures the band's ideological framing, moving from the performative outrage of punk protest to a more subdued and introspective critique of socio-political inertia. The consistent lexical negativity, devoid of evaluative contrast, may thus signal a rhetorical move from resistance to a kind of narrative stasis, where emotional engagement gives way to affective withdrawal. In this light, the lyrical discourse of the post-*American Idiot* period does not abandon social critique but recontextualises it through a discourse of exhaustion, a pattern that aligns with broader post-crisis cultural narratives of disillusionment and systemic stagnation.

5. Conclusions

This study combines corpus linguistics and sentiment analysis to examine shifts in Green Day's protest discourse across three phases of their discography, revealing evolving patterns in affective stance and ideological critique.

A close reading of selected keywords across Green Day's discography—drawn from three corpora representing their pre-*American Idiot*, *American Idiot*, and post-*American Idiot* phases—points to a clear transformation in the band's discursive orientation over time. In their early work, expressions like *your time*, *hell*, and *time* reveal personal angst, often articulated through irony or resignation. These terms frequently appear in contexts where frustration is turned inward or directed toward abstract dissatisfaction. There is little in the way of systemic critique; instead, the tone is one of passive alienation, where rebellion is more emotional than

ideological. With *American Idiot*, this changes significantly. Keywords such as *rebel*, *suburbia*, and *September* point to a more direct engagement with sociopolitical realities, especially in the aftermath of 9/11. The band's language becomes more pointed and performative, aligning itself with a broader critique of American culture, media, and war. This discursive stance, however, evolves again in their later albums, as can be seen in the *Post-American Idiot* phase. Terms like *the modern world*, *outlaws*, and *troubled times* suggest a shift away from overt confrontation toward a more reflective and mournful register. Here, the emphasis is less on resistance and more on enduring or narrating decline. Taken together, these shifts suggest that Green Day's protest discourse has moved from youthful alienation to full-throated dissent, and finally toward a more introspective form of cultural critique.

The sentiment analysis across Green Day's three lyrical phases confirms this trajectory in affective-discursive stance. The Pre-*American Idiot* and *American Idiot* corpora are marked by emotional polarity and heightened negativity, reflecting a discourse of rebellion, disillusionment, and ideological confrontation. By contrast, the Post-*American Idiot* era exhibits a flattened affective profile, with fewer sentiment extremes and more neutral tones.

From a CDA perspective, this shift suggests a movement away from overt dissent toward a more introspective and at times resigned or disenchanted affective positioning. Though critique remains present, it is increasingly mediated through sarcasm, narrative fatigue, and subdued emotional registers, indicating a transformation in both the band's expressive strategies and their ideological framing of contemporary social realities.

While the findings highlight significant discursive transformations, they also underscore the limitations of lexicon-based sentiment tools in capturing irony, ambiguity, and figurative language—especially in genres like punk rock—suggesting the need for future research that integrates multimodal analysis, listener reception studies, and more context-sensitive NLP frameworks.

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PUNK MUSIC, DISCOURSE, AND CULTURE
Exploring the Intersection with Edupunk

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Abstract – This study explores the dynamic relationship between punk music, its evolving discourse, and its influence on the edupunk movement, which advocates for alternative, learner-centered education rooted in punk's anti-authoritarian and DIY ethos. Using an interdisciplinary approach combining critical discourse analysis, cultural studies, and education, the research examines how punk music serves as a platform for socio-cultural critique, artistic expression, and educational innovation. By analyzing punk lyrics across time and tracing the genre's thematic and stylistic shifts, the study highlights punk's role in fostering rebellion, countercultural critique, and grassroots activism. It also investigates how punk's principles of accessibility, inclusivity, and learner agency inform edupunk practices, challenging traditional educational structures and empowering learners. Ultimately, the study highlights the potential of punk-inspired approaches to promote social justice, critical consciousness, and cultural resistance in education, while acknowledging the complexities of this intersection.

Keywords: punk music; punk culture; DIY ethics; edupunk; learner empowerment.

It's the courage to change/And admit your mistakes
It's the chance to rise up/With the raising of stakes
It's your consciousness/And the guilt you must feel
It's the time to stand up/And take back your raw deals
Because time has come/to put folks before wealth
Or you will lose your family/friends and yourself
(Star Fucking Hipsters "Empty Lives", 2008).

1. Introduction

Punk music has long been more than just a genre—it has served as both an artistic expression and a platform for socio-political critique (Bestley and Ogg 2012). This research investigates the multifaceted relationship between punk music, discourse evolution within the punk genre, and the integration of punk music and culture into the edupunk movement. Taking an interdisciplinary approach that bridges critical discourse analysis, cultural studies, and education, this study explores how punk music has influenced social activism and alternative educational models. Through qualitative

analysis of punk music lyrics spanning different eras, alongside historical examinations of punk discourse evolution, this research traces the thematic, linguistic, and stylistic shifts within the genre, and examines how punk music, with its emphasis on rebellion, DIY ethos, and countercultural critique, has intersected with broader social movements and cultural shifts over time (Panek 2021).

Furthermore, this study investigates the integration of punk music and culture into the edupunk movement, an educational philosophy that embraces learner-centered approaches inspired by punk's rejection of hierarchical structures. It explores the role of punk music as a catalyst for social change and community building, and examines how punk's emphasis on DIY ethics and grassroots activism informs educational practices that prioritize accessibility, inclusivity, and learner agency (Dines *et al*. 2023). However, it also highlights tensions and contradictions inherent in the fusion of punk and education, including questions of accessibility, inclusivity, and sustainability.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersections between music, culture, and education, highlighting the potential of punk-inspired approaches to promote social justice, critical consciousness, and cultural resistance within educational spaces.

2. Historical Evolution of Punk Discourse: From Rebellion to Resilience

Punk, set to mark its 50th anniversary in 2026 (Stewart 2019), encompasses a wide range of definitions and expressions, with some variations delving more profoundly into critiques of class and countercultural ideals (Wilkinson 2016). As a matter of fact, Punk has been defined in various ways—sometimes from external perspectives, such as by the music media (Worley 2017), and at other times from within, as a gathering of like-minded individuals, almost resembling an implicit religion (Stewart 2022). However, from a more holistic perspective, punk can be understood as revolving around three core principles: a commitment to values such as anti-sectarianism and egalitarianism, the practice of direct action through appearance, behavior, and social interactions, and the occupation of space—both in dedicated music venues and through its spread beyond these physical settings (Smith and Banfield 2023).

This section explores the historical linguistics of punk, tracing its evolution, and examining how linguistic variation within punk discourse reflects broader socio-political dynamics (Feld and Fox 1994).

2.1. Historical Linguistics of Punk: Tracing Evolution Over Time

The discourse of punk music (Easley 2015; Gaballo 2012; Panek 2021; Pearson 2019), a genre that emerged as a cultural revolution in the mid-1970s (Way 2016; Worley 2017), has undergone significant linguistic and thematic transformations over the decades. Born as a reaction against the status quo, punk quickly became a medium for expressing rebellion, disillusionment, and resistance (Duncombe 1997). However, as it evolved, the linguistic framework and thematic essence of punk also adapted to changing cultural, social, and political landscapes (Bestley and Ogg 2012; Thornton 1995).

In delineating the evolutionary features of punk discourse, this analysis focuses on the most prominent and recurrent trends within specific periods. It is important to acknowledge, however, that punk music constitutes a multifaceted and heterogeneous phenomenon, encompassing a diverse array of voices, subgenres, and ideological orientations. While this study highlights major developments, it does not claim to capture the full complexity of punk's cultural and linguistic diversity, which continues to evolve in varied and nuanced ways.

2.1.1. Early Punk Discourse: A Language of Rebellion

In its inception during the 1970s, punk was heavily characterized by its raw, unpolished language (Gaballo 2012). Stylistically, early punk songs were concise, often avoiding complex structures for straightforward verses and choruses. The language mirrored this simplicity, employing slang, vernacular, and expletives to establish authenticity and relatability.

Bands like the Sex Pistols, The Clash, and The Ramones adopted a confrontational tone, utilizing simple, direct language to critique societal norms (Savage 1991). Songs like the Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the U.K." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBojbjoMttI) epitomized this rebellious ethos, with lines like "I am an antichrist / I am an anarchist" encapsulating the defiance central to punk's early identity, i.e. its strong relationship with anarchism (Donaghey 2020; Smith and Banfield 2023).

Early punk lyrics often employed short, punchy phrases and simple language (Easley 2015) to convey urgency and anger, and relied on aggressive, explicit vocabulary that underscored feelings of frustration and alienation, as seen in songs like the Dead Kennedys' "Kill the Poor" (https://www.youtube.com/wat h?v=sgpa7wEAz7I), which emphasized defiance and shock value, challenging mainstream decorum, as in the song's first lines: "Efficiency and progress is ours once more / Now that we have the neutron bomb / It's nice and quick and clean and gets things done". The song's title is a stark double entendre, combining literal violence with satirical commentary on economic policies that neglect or exploit the poor.

The phrase "kill the poor" critiques the disregard for humanity under capitalist systems while adopting a mockingly cheerful tone to highlight the absurdity.

Lyrical content in early punk focused on themes of alienation, anti-authoritarianism, and rebellion against the establishment. This thematic core was reflected in songs like The Clash's "London Calling" (https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=a3XqMtam1I0). The song's lyrics capture a sense of urgency and impending doom, addressing fears of nuclear disaster, environmental collapse, and societal decay. The phrase "London calling to the faraway towns" positions the song as a call to action, emphasizing punk's role in resisting complacency and exposing systemic failures. The line "The ice age is coming, the sun's zooming in" conveys existential dread, reinforcing punk's role in articulating anxieties about an uncertain future, whereas "We ain't got no swing, 'cept for the ring of that truncheon thing" highlights the brutal reality of state repression, a recurring theme in punk's anti-authoritarian discourse. Through its evocative imagery and confrontational tone, "London Calling" exemplifies punk's ability to merge personal and political concerns, crafting a rebellious and prophetic anthem that remains relevant in contemporary discourse.

Songs like the Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen" (https://www.youtube.co m/watch?v=yqrAPOZxgzU) use raw, provocative language to critique authority, British nationalism, monarchy, and the illusion of freedom under a rigid social hierarchy. Released during Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee in 1977, the song's provocative lyrics and incendiary delivery epitomize punk's anti-establishment ethos. The refrain, "There is no future in England's dreaming", dismantles the myth of a prosperous and just Britain, exposing the disillusionment felt by working-class youth amid economic stagnation and political oppression. By twisting the British national anthem's title into an ironic sneer, the Sex Pistols weaponize language to challenge institutional authority. The infamous line "She ain't no human being" dehumanizes the Queen, stripping the monarchy of its sanctified image and portraying it as an outdated and oppressive institution. The song also frames Britain as a dystopia, branding it a "fascist regime" where social mobility is stifled, and rebellion is the only escape. Musically, the track's aggressive guitars and snarling vocals mirror its confrontational message, reinforcing punk's role as a vehicle for dissent. "God Save the Queen" remains one of punk's most infamous anthems, encapsulating the movement's raw defiance and refusal to conform.

Early punk lyrics disrupted traditional songwriting norms, rejecting structured storytelling in favor of raw, fragmented expressions of frustration, rebellion, and alienation. Unlike the carefully crafted narratives of mainstream rock and pop, punk lyrics often relied on short, choppy phrases, aggressive repetition, and disjointed imagery to reflect the disorderly, high-

energy nature of punk culture (Sabin 1999). This departure from conventional lyrical composition was both an artistic and ideological statement, reflecting punk's DIY ethos and rejection of musical elitism (Laing 1985). By stripping lyrics down to their bare essentials, early punk bands like The Ramones, The Sex Pistols, and The Clash captured the immediacy of youth disillusionment, making their messages more direct and visceral.

Repetition played a crucial role in amplifying punk's confrontational stance. Songs often featured shouted refrains that reinforced themes of social unrest and personal frustration. In The Ramones' "I Wanna Be Sedated" (https://www.youtu be.com/watch?v=bm51ihfi1p4), the title itself is repeated relentlessly, creating a hypnotic, almost manic effect that mirrors the song's theme of escapism (Heylin 2007). Similarly, The Sex Pistols' chant of "No Future" in "God Save the Queen" functions as both a nihilistic statement and a rallying cry of defiance against the British establishment (Marcus 1993). This stripped-down, almost primal approach to lyricism made punk songs instantly memorable, accessible, and perfect for collective expression in live performances. By embracing linguistic fragmentation and repetition, punk music rejected the polished sophistication of mainstream rock, instead prioritizing raw emotion and direct social critique (Bradshaw 2007; Gaballo 2012).

2.1.2. Evolution in Themes and Linguistic Complexity

As punk matured into the 1980s and 1990s, its discourse began to diversify. Subgenres such as hardcore punk, pop punk, and post-punk emerged, each bringing distinct linguistic elements and thematic focuses. In the 1980s, hardcore punk emerged as a prominent subgenre, particularly in the United States (Ambrosch 2015). Bands like Black Flag, Minor Threat, and Bad Brains maintained the raw aggression of early punk but amplified it with even more intense delivery and politically charged lyrics.

This shift in performance style influenced the linguistic rhythm and cadence of lyrics, emphasizing urgency and immediacy, as in "Damaged" (1981) by Black Flag (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuLWPr9HmFM). Unlike the politically charged anthems of bands like The Clash or the ironic nihilism of the Sex Pistols, "Damaged" channels its anger inward, depicting personal turmoil and existential frustration through a visceral, almost violent lyrical approach. Henry Rollins' growling, abrasive vocal delivery embodies the intensity of the album's themes, reinforcing the idea that punk is not just about external rebellion but also about internal struggle and psychological dissonance (Azerrad 2001). "Damaged" takes punk discourse into darker, introspective territory, portraying mental distress with an unfiltered rawness that would influence later hardcore and grunge movements (Blush 2001).

This rejection of optimism and embrace of existential rage sets "Damaged" apart from other punk records of its time, reinforcing punk's role as a medium for unpolished, unrestrained self-expression.

Punk scenes (Anderson, Jenkins 2001; McKay 2023) in cities like Los Angeles, Washington D.C., and New York developed distinct linguistic identities (Debies-Carl 2014). Los Angeles bands like Black Flag incorporated West Coast slang and references to local culture, while East Coast punk often reflected the grittiness of urban life. The straightedge movement[1], championed by bands like Minor Threat, introduced a unique lexicon centered on sobriety and self-control, as in "Straight Edge" by Minor Threat (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBDd0ths_OSk). Terms like "X'd up" (referring to the practice of drawing X's on hands or other parts of the body) became symbolic of this subculture (Hebdige 1979; Bennet 1999; Muggleton 2000)[2].

The 1980s saw punk lyrics become more overtly political, addressing issues like police brutality, nuclear proliferation, and systemic inequality (Savage 1991). Bands like Dead Kennedys used biting satire and dark humor to critique global politics, as seen in songs like "Holiday in Cambodia" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UjOQ0w_4CU).

The 1990s brought a wave of pop punk, with bands like Green Day, Blink-182, and The Offspring achieving mainstream success. This era saw notable shifts in punk discourse. Pop punk bands like Green Day and Blink-182 adopted a lighter, more melodic approach, infusing humor and adolescent concerns into their lyrics, which often employed conversational and relatable language, focusing on themes like teenage angst, relationships, and suburban disillusionment. While still rebellious, the language of pop punk became more introspective, emphasizing personal experiences and relationships. Green Day's "Basket Case" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUTGr5t3MoY) exemplifies this style with its introspective, self-deprecating tone.

The shift signaled punk's growing appeal to a wider, younger audience, bridging themes of rebellion with relatable narratives. Pop punk frequently incorporated humor and irony, reflecting a shift away from the aggressive seriousness of hardcore punk. Blink-182's "What's My Age Again?" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7l5ZeVVoCA) exemplifies this trend with its playful, irreverent lyrics.

[1] See Medium's article "Straight edge: How one 46-second song started a 35-year movement" for more on the straightedge movement (https://medium.com/timeline/straight-edge-movement-67544e6f8d8 8).

[2] See DIY Conspiracy's article "X-ing up (To X-up)" for more on this symbol (https://diyconspiracy.net/terms/x-up/).

As punk became more commercially viable, its linguistic style adapted to broader audiences. This shift often involved simplifying themes and reducing the rawness characteristic of earlier punk discourse.

2.1.3. Contemporary Punk: Resilience and Inclusivity

In the 21st century, punk discourse has continued to evolve, blending traditional punk elements with influences from other genres and addressing contemporary issues, increasingly embracing themes of resilience, identity, and inclusivity (O'Meara 2003; Reynolds 2005; Stewart 2019; Xiao *et al.* 2022). Modern punk bands, such as Against Me!, IDLES, and The Linda Lindas, often tackle issues like mental health, systemic oppression, and gender identity (Downes 2012). The linguistic style reflects these shifts, incorporating diverse vocabularies and narrative techniques to address complex issues. For example, Against Me!'s "Transgender Dysphoria Blues", employs evocative and emotionally raw language to explore the struggles of transgender identity (https://www.youtube.co m/watch?v=dq_va3wNfFo). Similarly, IDLES' "Danny Nedelko" celebrates multiculturalism and solidarity with a mix of earnestness and irony, reflecting the genre's adaptive linguistic style (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkF_G-RF66M): "My best friend is an alien / My best friend is a citizen / He's strong, he's earnest, he's innocent".

Punk has merged with genres like hip-hop, electronic music, and folk, influencing its linguistic style. The punk-hip-hop fusion of bands like Ho99o9 introduces rhythmic patterns and vocabulary from hip-hop culture, while folk-punk bands like Against Me! use narrative-driven lyrics. While early punk was defined by rebellion, contemporary punk often emphasizes resilience and activism (Van Leeuwen 1998, Patton 2018). Lyrics frequently focus on collective action, solidarity, and envisioning a better world, as seen in the works of Anti-Flag [e.g., "This Is the End (for You My Friend") (https://www.youtube.com/wat ch?v=qnVD7WuarSo)] and War on Women [e.g., "Capture the Flag" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ndoyfV9n4dY)].

Stylistically, contemporary punk often blends the urgency of early punk with poetic elements and layered metaphors (Laing 2015; Panek 2021). This linguistic evolution aligns with broader societal changes, showcasing punk's ability to adapt while retaining its core ethos of challenging norms.

2.2. Language Variation and Change in Punk Music

The linguistic variation within punk music reflects the diversity of its communities and their sociocultural contexts. This section explores the factors influencing linguistic change and the ways in which punk discourse adapts to broader social, cultural, and political dynamics.

2.2.1. Regional Dialects and Sociolects in Punk

Punk's linguistic variation is deeply shaped by the regional and social contexts from which it emerges, reflecting the genre's adaptability and diversity (Feld *et al.* 2004). Across the globe, punk's raw, rebellious ethos is expressed in unique ways, with bands infusing their lyrics with local dialects, sociolects, and multilingual elements (Xiao *et al*. 2022).

The regional punk scenes that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s created distinctive linguistic identities, shaped by local culture and geography (Anderson and Jenkins 2001; Goshert 2000; Smith and Banfield 2023). Early British punk, for instance, was heavily influenced by working-class dialects, particularly Cockney and other regional accents. Bands like the Sex Pistols and The Clash used vernacular speech to connect with their working-class audiences, as exemplified by phrases like "bollocks" and "Oi!". The latter also became the rallying cry of the Oi! subgenre[3], known for its association with street-level culture. Bands like The Clash and The Jam incorporated distinctly British vernacular, lending authenticity and local relevance to their lyrics. Phrases like "London calling to the faraway towns" (The Clash) not only set the geographic stage but also embed a cultural identity into the music.

In contrast, American punk bands often draw from regional accents and idioms, particularly reflecting urban environments (Bennet and Peterson 2004; Debies-Carl 2014; Goshert 2000). The Dead Kennedys' West Coast punk often reflected the laid-back yet defiant ethos of California as blended with sharp critiques of Californian culture and politics, while East Coast bands like the Ramones channeled the grit of New York City through their straightforward, no-frills language. The Midwest punk scene, represented by bands like The Replacements, showcased a more introspective, lyrical style.

The Dead Kennedys' song "California Über Alles" (https://www.youtube.c om/watch?v=QVcNfiRWS6U) exemplifies their West Coast punk style. Released in 1979, the track satirizes then-Governor Jerry Brown, portraying him as a "Zen fascist" who enforces a dystopian regime under the guise of progressive ideals. The lyrics reference "suede denim secret police" and "organic poison gas", highlighting the band's concerns about authoritarianism masked by a hippie aesthetic. This song reflects the band's critical perspective on California's political landscape during that era.

"53rd and 3rd" by The Ramones exemplifies the punk tradition of storytelling rooted in real-life struggles, shining a light on topics often ignored by mainstream culture. The Vietnam War reference is particularly

[3] See Punk Wiki *Fandom* for more on the Oi! subgenre (https://punk.fandom.com/wiki/Oi!).

poignant because it connects a larger sociopolitical issue with individual lived experiences. In doing so, the song critiques the interplay between personal trauma and systemic neglect, offering a raw yet powerful glimpse into the human cost of societal failures. This song captures the essence of punk as both a musical and cultural movement: it's unpolished, direct, and brutally honest, yet layered with meaning that challenges listeners to think critically about the world around them.

From the Midwest punk scene, a prominent band, The Replacements, stands out for their introspective and lyrical songwriting, which often delves into themes of dissatisfaction and personal struggle. A prime example of this is their song "Unsatisfied" from the 1984 album *Let It Be* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DU6IndADEWI), in which the band repeatedly expresses a deep sense of discontent with the refrain "Look me in the eye, then tell me that I'm satisfied – Are you satisfied?". This candid expression of inner turmoil reflects the band's introspective style, setting them apart from their punk contemporaries.

Punk discourse, though rooted in the UK and USA, rapidly transcended borders to become a global phenomenon, reshaped by local cultures and struggles (Dines and Bestley 2020; Guerra 2018; Guerra and Santos Silva 2015; Lalama 2013; Moog 2023). As punk spread, it adapted its rebellious ethos to diverse social, political, and linguistic contexts, giving rise to unique expressions of defiance worldwide. From Latin America's raw critiques of dictatorship to Japan's fusion of punk with traditional cultural motifs, punk became a tool for addressing oppression and voicing marginalized perspectives. Multilingual lyrics, regional dialects, and localized themes illustrate how punk evolved beyond its Western origins, embodying a universal spirit of resistance while reflecting the realities of global communities.

Punk's global proliferation introduced linguistic diversity (Dines and Bestley 2020; Patton 2018; Xiao *et al*. 2022). *Los Violadores* brought punk's rebellious spirit to Argentina (Woods 2024), grounding their critiques in the harsh realities of military rule. Unlike British and American punk, which often used irony or satire, their lyrics, such as in "*Represión*" (https://www.youtube.com/wat ch?v=Mjhj2yLoKhk), are raw and direct, reflecting the immediate dangers of defiance under dictatorship. By incorporating Spanish and addressing themes like oppression and inequality, *Los Violadores* localized punk's global ethos, creating a powerful voice for resistance in Latin America (Rohrer 2014). Their work exemplifies punk's ability to confront injustice and inspire resilience, adapting its message to reflect the specific struggles of their region.

Similarly, Japanese punk bands like The Stalin fused punk's defiant ethos with Japanese cultural motifs. One of The Stalin's most iconic songs, "Stalinism" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ay48IxveSrE), captures

their rebellious spirit and fuses punk's anarchistic energy with commentary on Japanese society (Matsue 2008).

In Italy, *Negazione* emerged during a period of social and political unrest (the 1980s and early 1990s), reflecting the frustrations of a generation navigating economic instability, political corruption, and cultural alienation. Their music became a voice for youth disillusioned with mainstream politics and societal expectations. Songs like "*Tutti Pazzi*" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyKwXNdGsl4) are a powerful example of how Italian punk (Marino and Mugnaini 2024) adapted the global punk ethos to address local issues, blending visceral emotion with thought-provoking lyrics. Its lines critique the homogenization of society, where individuality is suppressed in favor of blind obedience. *Negazione*'s delivery, marked by raw vocals and aggressive instrumentation, amplifies the frustration expressed in the lyrics. The urgency in their music mirrors the punk ethos of resisting authority and societal norms. While deeply rooted in the Italian context, these lyrics resonate with a broader global critique of authoritarianism and conformity, showing punk's universal appeal. *Negazione* well represented this period of radical changes, passing unscathed through the alternative fashions of the moment, both in terms of their music and their look, which was far from English and American clichés, and evolving to such an extent that they managed to remain credible even when Italian punk rock was heading towards its inevitable decline.

Sociolects also play an essential role in shaping punk discourse, providing a linguistic framework that reflects the values, experiences, and affiliations of its diverse communities. The language of punk is not merely about communication; it is an active declaration of identity, resistance, and solidarity. Working-class slang, countercultural jargon, and activist language are integral components of this sociolect, appearing prominently in punk lyrics to highlight the genre's connection to marginalized voices. By employing language tied to specific communities and ideologies, punk artists and fans signal their membership and commitment to the subculture's ethos of rebellion and self-determination (Muggleton 2000).

In punk discourse, sociolects emerge as tools for reinforcing group identity, often grounded in shared struggles and values. For example, the working-class roots of early punk in the UK fostered a linguistic style steeped in regional slang and colloquial expressions, signaling solidarity with the disenfranchised. Bands like The Clash and Sham 69 utilized street-level language to directly address the economic hardships and frustrations of their audience, creating a sense of authenticity and shared experience. Similarly, American punk often borrowed from the language of activism, adopting terms associated with movements like civil rights and anarchism to articulate its political critiques (Donaghey 2020; Hannon 2010).

Subgenres within punk have developed their own sociolects to reflect

their unique ideologies. The straightedge movement, which emerged in the hardcore punk scene of the early 1980s (Kuhn 2010), introduced a distinct lexicon centered on sobriety and self-discipline. Terms like "clean," "sober," and "X'd up" symbolize the movement's rejection of alcohol, drugs, and other intoxicants, creating a linguistic shorthand that emphasizes personal responsibility and collective purity. These terms are not just descriptive; they are performative, signaling one's commitment to the movement and offering a counterpoint to punk's stereotypical association with hedonism.

Similarly, the queercore subgenre has developed its own sociolect, celebrating queer identity and challenging heteronormative structures. Emerging in the 1980s as a response to both mainstream punk's lack of inclusivity and broader societal marginalization, queercore uses language as a tool of empowerment. Phrases like "queer punk" assert pride in nonconformity, while themes of chosen family, intersectionality, and resistance to oppression are central to its discourse. The language of queercore reclaims derogatory terms and imbues them with new meaning, creating a space where marginalized identities are not only acknowledged but celebrated.

The sociolects of punk extend beyond lyrics to include everyday language within punk communities. In DIY spaces, zines, and conversations, the use of specialized jargon fosters a sense of belonging and mutual understanding (Gaballo 2012). This linguistic practice helps maintain the integrity of the subculture (Gelder and Thornton 1997; Hebdige 1979; Muggleton 2000), differentiating insiders from outsiders and reinforcing punk's emphasis on autonomy and authenticity. For example, phrases like "DIY ethos" (Moran 2010) reflect punk's commitment to self-production and rejection of corporate control, encapsulating a core value in just a few words.

Punk's sociolects also function as a form of resistance, challenging dominant linguistic norms and power structures. By using language that prioritizes inclusivity, dissent, and subversion, punk discourse destabilizes mainstream ideologies and offers alternative ways of seeing and describing the world. This linguistic rebellion mirrors punk's broader cultural stance, creating a feedback loop where language both reflects and reinforces the subculture's principles (Gelder and Thornton 1997).

In this way, sociolects are far more than linguistic tools; they are deeply embedded in punk's identity as a platform for marginalized voices (Gaballo 2012; Stewart 2019). Through the use of working-class slang, countercultural jargon, and activist language, punk continues to carve out spaces for resistance and solidarity, ensuring that its discourse remains as dynamic and defiant as the music itself.

2.2.2. Linguistic Innovation in Punk

Punk has been a fertile ground for linguistic innovation, often inventing or popularizing terms that later permeate mainstream culture, thus reflecting its boundary-pushing ethos (Holliday 1999; Zbikowski 2009). For instance, the term "punk" itself, originally meaning a petty criminal or worthless person (https://www.etymonline.com/word/punk), was reclaimed to signify defiance and authenticity. Similarly, expressions like "DIY" (do it yourself) became central to punk ethos, symbolizing self-reliance and rejection of corporate control (Gaballo 2012; McKay 2023; Moran 2010).

Punk has expanded semantic fields by repurposing existing words or creating new ones. The Clash, for example, use the term "clampdown" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_lt4O-EHNnw)—a pun that plays on the idea of growing older and conforming to oppressive systems—to evoke imagery of both physical suppression (a clamp tightening) and the metaphorical "calm down", representing submission to authority. The pun reinforces the critique of societal control, as lead singer Joe Strummer confirmed in an interview: "this song and our overall message was to wake-up, pay attention to what really is going on around you, politically, socially all of it...before you know it you have become what you despise" (D'Ambrosio 2003, p. 6).

Linguistic playfulness is also evident in punk's use of puns, wordplay, and irony. The Dead Kennedys, for example, often used provocative song titles such as "Too Drunk to F***" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Jzdikbi9yE)—mocking the expression "too drunk to drive"—to challenge societal taboos while incorporating humor and satire. This playful subversion underscores punk's resistance not only to authority but also to linguistic conventions (Panek 2021).

The visual elements of punk music, including album artwork, fashion, and music videos, are integral to its discourse. Punk album covers often feature bold, provocative imagery designed to shock and confront. The Sex Pistols' "Never Mind the Bollocks" cover, with its fluorescent yellow background and ransom-note typography, exemplifies this aesthetic.

Particularly powerful in punk music are multimodal metaphors (Way and McKerrell 2017; Zbikowski 2009) because they combine language (lyrics) with music, vocal delivery, printed matter and performance to create layered meanings. These metaphors emerge when verbal elements (lyrics) interact with non-verbal elements (images, melody, rhythm, instrumentation, and vocal tone) to convey ideas and emotions (Streeck *et al*. 2011).

An example of multimodal metaphors is NOFX's album *The War on Errorism* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=naSD4YQ8-Mk&t=3s), which exemplifies punk satire, critiquing the Bush administration's "War on Terror" through clever wordplay and biting humor (See Figure 1). The title replaces

"Terror" with "Errorism", highlighting the perceived hypocrisy and mistakes in U.S. policies. The cover, featuring a caricature of George W. Bush as a clown alongside the American flag, underscores the critique by mocking his leadership and suggesting it undermines core American values like freedom and justice. Blending sharp linguistic and visual elements, the album challenges blind nationalism and authority, embodying punk's rebellious spirit while engaging listeners with its irreverent humor.

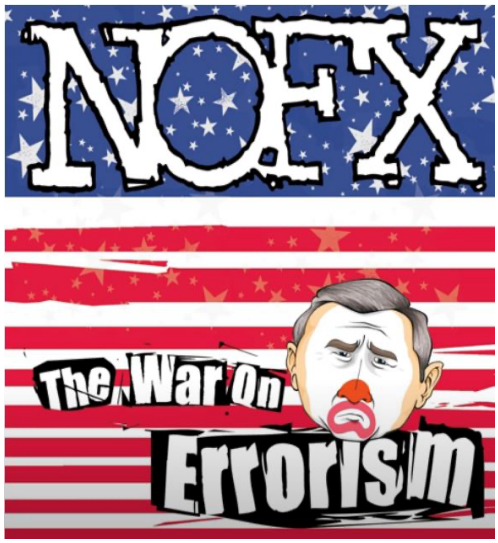

Figure 1
Example of multimodal metaphors: NOFX's album "The War on Errorism" (2003).

This combination of linguistic and visual elements exemplifies punk's irreverent approach to political dissent. By mocking Bush and his policies, NOFX invites listeners to question authority and resist blind nationalism. At the same time, the humor ensures the critique remains engaging, drawing in audiences who might otherwise avoid overtly political messages. The album title and cover are not just provocative—they embody punk's ethos of subversion, holding power accountable through art that refuses to conform or soften its edges.

Multilingual punk bands often code-switch between languages, blending linguistic elements to create a hybridized discourse (Holliday 1999; Van Leeuwen 1998, 2012). This practice is common among bands from multicultural regions, such as bilingual punk bands in Canada and Latin America, but also from post-colonized territories.

For instance, the opening line of Asian Dub Foundation's "Rebel Warrior" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElKl5s1xQ8o), "*Ami bidrohi*! I the rebel warrior", is a bold statement blending Bengali and English to connect cultural heritage with global resistance. Referencing Kazi Nazrul Islam's iconic Bengali poem *Bidrohi*, the phrase celebrates rebellion and anti-colonial struggle. By incorporating English, the band bridges diasporic

identity with universal defiance against oppression. The bilingual proclamation, paired with lyrics calling for unity and resistance, becomes a rallying cry for solidarity. Musically, their fusion of dub, punk, and electronic echoes this hybridity, reflecting the diasporic fight against cultural erasure and systemic injustice.

2.2.3. Punk Discourse: Continuity and Change

Punk music, through its linguistic, visual, and performative elements, has carved out a unique space for rebellion, empowerment, and social commentary. Its discourse strategies and subcultural practices emphasize authenticity, resistance, and solidarity, making punk a powerful vehicle for identity construction and collective action. Despite its linguistic evolution, certain constants persist within punk discourse (Gaballo 2012; Panek 2021). Rebellion remains a cornerstone of the genre, expressed through linguistic choices that defy convention and authority. The use of expletives, informal speech, and unpolished delivery continues to reinforce punk's anti-establishment ethos (Way 2016). However, punk's ability to adapt linguistically and thematically has ensured its relevance across generations. From the brash simplicity of the 1970s to the nuanced introspection of today, punk discourse has expanded its expressive capabilities while retaining its core message of resistance and resilience (Lalama 2013).

By examining punk through the lenses of linguistic analysis (Aleshinskaya 2013; Faudree 2012; Zbikowski 2009), sociolinguistic perspectives (Feld *et al*. 2004; Van Leeuwen 2012; Way 2016), and multimodal discourse (Gaballo 2012; Way and McKerrel 2017), we gain a deeper understanding of its evolution and enduring relevance. Punk's ability to adapt and diversify while remaining true to its core ethos ensures its place as a dynamic and transformative cultural force. Whether through the aggressive simplicity of hardcore punk (Ambrosch 2015; Easley 2015; Pearson 2019), the introspective narratives of pop-punk (Van Leeuwen 1998; Way 2016), or the feminist manifestos of riot grrrl (Downes 2012), punk continues to inspire rebellion and resilience in equal measure.

In conclusion, the historical evolution of punk discourse underscores the genre's dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation. By tracing linguistic shifts within punk, we gain insight into its role as both a cultural artifact and a living, breathing medium for societal critique (Way and McKerrell 2017). Through its varied dialects, sociolects, and thematic explorations, punk continues to be a powerful voice for change and a testament to the enduring spirit of rebellion (Bennet 2006).

3. Integration of Punk Culture into Edupunk: Empowering Learners, Challenging Hierarchies

The integration of punk culture into education, often referred to as "edupunk"[4], represents a radical reimagining of teaching and learning. Rooted in the ethos of the punk movement, edupunk seeks to disrupt traditional hierarchies in education and empower learners to take control of their own knowledge (Jagusch 2021). This educational philosophy emphasizes do-it-yourself (DIY) practices, resistance to institutional control, and the creation of collaborative, learner-centered environments (O'Hara 1995). By applying punk culture's principles of rebellion, creativity, and resilience to education, edupunk challenges the dominance of standardized curricula and advocates for a more egalitarian and flexible approach to learning (Freire 1970).

This section explores the integration of punk culture into edupunk through two main themes: the ideological connections between punk and edupunk, and the broader implications of edupunk for rethinking the future of education (Dines *et al*. 2023).

3.1. The Ideological Foundations of Edupunk

Edupunk draws heavily from the ideological foundations of punk culture, particularly its emphasis on challenging authority, fostering creativity, and embracing individual agency (Furness 2012). Punk's anti-establishment ethos resonates with educational movements that seek to disrupt hierarchical structures and empower marginalized voices (Dines *et al*. 2023).

In the edupunk framework, the distinction between schooling and education is fundamental. Schooling is viewed as an institutionalized mechanism designed to socialize individuals into dominant societal norms, often prioritizing economic productivity and standardized performance metrics over intellectual and personal growth. As Furness (2012) notes, neoliberal policies have reshaped universities into "degree-factories" where learning is increasingly tied to market demands. Conversely, education in the edupunk ethos is a dynamic, liberating, and reciprocal process that empowers both teachers and learners. Drawing from thinkers like Ivan Illich (1971) and Paulo Freire (1970), edupunk rejects the "banking model" of education, where students passively receive information, in favor of a transformative approach where "knowledge emerges only in invention and reinvention" (Furness 2012, p. 133). This vision of education fosters critical inquiry,

[4] The term "edupunk" was coined by Jim Groom and used by Stephen Downes in May 2008 to refer to "a new instructional style that is defiantly student-centered, resourceful, teacher- or community-created rather than corporate-sourced, and underwritten by a progressive political stance" (David Cohen, *The Guardian*, Mon 16 Jun 2008).

creativity, and resistance to hegemonic structures, positioning learning as an act of rebellion against hierarchical, corporate-driven schooling, an act of rebellion that Furness calls a "revolutionary act of love" (Furness 2012, p. 141).

Edupunk, therefore, champions alternative learning spaces—whether through DIY initiatives, community-driven education, or independent study—that resist institutional constraints and uphold education as a tool for personal and collective empowerment.

3.1.1. Resistance to Institutional Authority

In punk culture, resistance to authority is not just an attitude—it is a lifestyle embodied through music, fashion, and DIY practices that reject conformity and celebrate individuality (O'Hara 1995; Printz 2014). Punk's ethos of self-reliance and defiance translates seamlessly into Edupunk, a movement that critiques traditional educational institutions for being overly bureaucratic, rigid, and exclusionary (Ebner 2008; Freire 1970). Both movements share a disdain for hierarchical systems that prioritize control over creativity.

Edupunk, inspired by punk's anti-establishment stance, challenges the mainstream "one-size-fits-all" education model that often values standardized testing and rigid curricula over critical thinking and self-expression. These systems can alienate learners by stifling individuality and creativity, much like how punk critiqued the monotony of mainstream culture. Edupunk instead advocates for personalized, learner-centered approaches where individuals design their own educational experiences (Jagush 2021).

This process mirrors punk's DIY ethic—learners are encouraged to mix formal education with informal methods like online courses, peer learning, or self-taught skills. By leveraging freely available resources and fostering creativity, Edupunk empowers individuals to take control of their education, dismantling traditional barriers to access (Freire 1970; Furness 2012). In essence, Edupunk reclaims education as a tool for empowerment and personal growth, embodying the same spirit of resistance and reinvention that defines punk culture.

3.1.2. DIY Ethos and Autonomy

The DIY ethos of punk culture (Moran 2010), rooted in self-reliance and rejection of mainstream systems, serves as a foundational principle for edupunk (Vass and Heffernan 2023). In punk, the DIY spirit manifests in the creation and distribution of independent music, bypassing industry gatekeepers like record labels and producers (Moran 2010; O'Hara 1995). Punk bands self-record their albums, distribute them through underground networks, and organize grassroots tours. Zines, hand-made publications filled

with art, commentary, and interviews, further reflect this ethos, allowing punk communities to share ideas and foster connections without relying on corporate media (Gaballo 2012). This culture of independence is not just about rebellion—it is about creating alternatives and seizing control of one's narrative.

Edupunk adopts this same philosophy, encouraging learners to take charge of their own education by rejecting rigid institutional frameworks (Furness 2012). Instead of following predefined curricula, edupunk learners use open-source tools, online platforms, and collaborative networks to tailor their educational paths to their unique goals and interests (Vass and Heffernan 2023). Just as punk bands challenge the authority of the music industry, edupunk challenges traditional education systems, emphasizing that knowledge is not the sole property of universities or schools (Jagusch 2021).

This DIY approach fosters autonomy and creativity, empowering individuals to explore unconventional methods of learning, such as peer-to-peer teaching, open-access courses, and project-based education. It reflects a belief in learning as an organic, flexible process, free from the constraints of standardized testing and rigid hierarchies (Furness 2012). By doing so, edupunk, like punk itself, fosters individuality, resourcefulness, and the breaking of boundaries to create something entirely one's own.

3.1.3. Community and Collaboration

While punk culture is often associated with fierce individualism, its core values also emphasize community and collective action. Punk scenes (Bennet and Peterson 2004) thrive as tight-knit communities that offer solidarity and mutual support, fostering spaces where individuals can challenge societal norms together. This sense of shared purpose extends to organizing benefit shows, creating communal living spaces, and forming activist networks to address social and political issues. The idea of "strength in numbers" runs parallel to punk's ethos, balancing personal autonomy with collective empowerment (Ebner 2008).

Edupunk adopts this communal spirit by prioritizing collaborative learning environments where knowledge is not dictated from the top down but co-created through shared experiences. Just as punk bands collaborate to produce music and zines (Gaballo 2012), edupunk encourages learners and educators to work together, exchanging ideas and building knowledge collectively (Ebner *et al*. 2011). Open education initiatives like MOOCs, Wikipedia, and peer-to-peer learning platforms embody this ethos by providing spaces where knowledge is freely accessible and shaped by diverse contributors.

These initiatives break down traditional hierarchies, democratizing education and fostering inclusivity. In an edupunk framework, learners act

not as passive recipients of information but as active participants in a collaborative process (Furness 2012), echoing punk's emphasis on community-driven action. This blending of individual agency and collective effort ensures that education remains a shared, empowering endeavor.

3.2. Challenging Hierarchies and Empowering Learners

Edupunk's emphasis on empowerment extends beyond individual learners to address systemic inequalities in education. By challenging hierarchies and advocating for inclusive practices, edupunk seeks to create a more equitable and accessible educational system (Jagusch 2021).

Edupunk challenges the alienation imposed by dominant education systems by demanding personal responsibility and agency in opposition to capitalist structuralism. Rather than passively accepting societal privileges, learners are urged to reject hierarchical advantages and work in solidarity with marginalized communities. As Furness (2012) argues, this approach disrupts hegemonic macrostructures by fostering a radical, collective resistance to oppressive systems. By centering lived experiences and dismantling exclusionary educational practices, edupunk transforms learning into an act of defiance—one that prioritizes empowerment, equity, and the reimagining of knowledge beyond institutional constraints.

3.2.1. Addressing Inequities in Education

Traditional education systems have long been criticized for perpetuating social hierarchies by privileging certain groups—often those with financial means, access to elite institutions, or societal privilege—while marginalizing others. These systems can create barriers for learners from underrepresented communities, reinforcing inequities based on socioeconomic status, race, gender, or geography (Furness 2012). Edupunk directly confronts these disparities by advocating educational models that prioritize accessibility, inclusion, and social justice.

A cornerstone of this effort lies in leveraging technology and community-driven initiatives to democratize learning. Notable examples are platforms like OpenCourseWare (https://ocw.mit.edu/) and Coursera (https://www.coursera.org /) , which provide free or low-cost courses from world-class universities, breaking down the barriers of cost and geography that have historically limited access to high-quality education. These resources enable learners from diverse backgrounds to gain knowledge and skills that were once reserved for a privileged few, empowering them to compete on a more equal footing in academic and professional spheres (Dines *et al*. 2023).

Community-based programs further exemplify edupunk's commitment

to equity. After-school tutoring initiatives, workshops in underserved areas, and grassroots educational efforts bring learning opportunities directly to marginalized communities. These programs often rely on volunteer educators, peer mentors, and open-access materials, reflecting punk's DIY ethos and commitment to collective action.

Edupunk's focus on dismantling educational inequities is rooted in its belief that learning should be a right, not a privilege (Furness 2012). By rejecting exclusionary practices and embracing models that empower all learners, edupunk challenges traditional hierarchies and fosters a more inclusive, egalitarian vision of education.

3.2.2. Fostering Critical Consciousness

Punk culture's provocative, confrontational nature makes it a powerful medium for critiquing societal norms and injustices. This ethos finds a natural ally in edupunk, which channels punk's defiance into fostering critical consciousness—a concept rooted in the educational theories of Paulo Freire (https://freire.org/paul o-freire). Freire emphasized the importance of education as a tool for liberation, urging learners to move beyond passive consumption of knowledge to actively question and challenge oppressive systems. Edupunk embraces this vision, transforming education into a space where learners critically engage with the world around them, dissect dominant ideologies, and imagine alternatives to the status quo (Dines *et al*. 2023; Dunn 2016; O'Hara 1995; Vass and Heffernan 2016).

Edupunk curricula often incorporate elements like critical media literacy to develop these skills. For example, students might analyze how advertisements, news media, or entertainment portray race, gender, and class, uncovering the subtle ways in which power structures shape societal narratives. This analysis fosters an awareness of systemic inequalities and equips learners with tools to deconstruct and resist these narratives (Freire 1970; Furness 2012).

The confrontational energy of punk culture inspires learners to not only question authority but also take action (Jagusch 2021). By combining critical pedagogy with punk's rebellious spirit, edupunk empowers students to become active participants in their education and advocates for social change, fostering a generation capable of challenging injustice and reimagining a more equitable world (Freire 1970).

3.2.3. Promoting Lifelong Learning

Edupunk emphasizes lifelong learning as a powerful tool for both personal growth and collective empowerment, challenging the traditional view of education as a fixed, linear process that ends with formal schooling (Vass and

Heffernan 2023). In today's rapidly evolving world, the ability to adapt, innovate, and continuously acquire new knowledge and skills has become essential for navigating shifting social, economic, and technological landscapes (Thornton 1995; Ebner *et al*. 2011). Edupunk embodies this philosophy by fostering a mindset of curiosity and self-directed learning (Jagush 2021), empowering individuals to take control of their education long after they leave traditional classrooms.

This approach aligns closely with punk culture's ethos of reinvention and adaptability. Punk musicians, for instance, are known for their relentless experimentation, blending genres, introducing unconventional sounds, and evolving their artistic expressions. Similarly, edupunk learners are encouraged to embrace exploration and experimentation, pursuing diverse interests and developing new competencies throughout their lives. Whether it's learning a new language (Ferrarese 2017), mastering a technical skill (Ebner *et al*. 2011), or delving into art and philosophy (Bestley and Ogg 2012; O'Hara 1995; Prinz 2014), edupunk promotes a spirit of continuous self-improvement.

By rejecting rigid educational timelines and embracing a lifelong commitment to learning, edupunk prepares individuals to thrive in a dynamic world. It mirrors punk's defiant rejection of conformity, empowering learners to redefine themselves, adapt to challenges, and remain engaged in shaping their personal and collective futures.

3.3. Tensions and Contradictions in Edupunk

The fusion of punk culture with education, as embodied by edupunk, is as provocative as it is complex, with tensions and contradictions woven deeply into its fabric. At its core, edupunk advocates accessibility, inclusivity, and the dismantling of hierarchies in learning (Jagush 2021), yet it faces contradictions that challenge these ideals.

One major tension is accessibility (Furness 2012): while edupunk promotes open resources and DIY learning, access to technology, stable internet, and makerspaces often depends on socioeconomic privilege (Dines *et al.* 2023). Additionally, the time required for self-directed learning is not equally available to all, particularly those balancing multiple jobs or caretaking responsibilities.

Inclusivity also remains a challenge. Despite punk's anti-establishment ethos, it has struggled with exclusionary tendencies regarding race, gender, and class. Similarly, edupunk spaces can inadvertently replicate hierarchies by privileging the loudest voices (Stewart 2019). The emphasis on individual autonomy over collective care may also alienate those from cultures that prioritize mutual aid.

Sustainability presents another issue. Punk's DIY ethos thrives on short

bursts of creativity but lacks the long-term infrastructure needed for education (Jagush 2021; O'Hara 1995). Additionally, while edupunk critiques traditional education, formal institutions remain vital pathways to social mobility for marginalized communities. Rejecting them entirely could hinder rather than help equity efforts.

To realize its transformative potential, edupunk must critically engage with these tensions, ensuring accessibility, sustainability, and diverse representation. By addressing these contradictions, it can create a more inclusive and enduring model of radical education.

As the challenges facing education continue to evolve, the principles of edupunk remain as relevant as ever. By embracing the spirit of rebellion and resilience that defines punk culture, edupunk offers a path forward—one that values autonomy, creativity, and the power of learning to transform lives and societies.

4. Conclusions

Punk, as both a musical genre and a cultural movement, has consistently operated as a platform for rebellion, empowerment, and social commentary. Its themes are conveyed through a dynamic interplay of linguistic, visual, and performative elements that together create a distinct and compelling discourse. This paper examined the themes and methods used in punk music to communicate ideologies, identities, and social critiques. By examining the linguistic features (Aleshinskaya 2013; Faudree 2012; Zbikowski 2009), sociolinguistic perspectives (Feld *et al*. 2004; Van Leeuwen 2012; Way 2016), and multimodal dimensions of punk discourse (Gaballo 2012; Way and McKerrel 2017), the analysis uncovered a variety of discourse strategies that make this genre a resilient and evolving force (Bennet 2006; Way and McKerrell 2017):

1. Oppositional Framing: Punk frequently constructs its identity in opposition to societal norms and mainstream culture. This is evident in lyrics that critique consumerism, political corruption, and conformity; e.g., The Dead Kennedys' "Kill the Poor" uses irony to satirize economic inequality, while Green Day's "American Idiot" condemns media-driven nationalism.
2. Intertextuality: Punk songs often reference historical events, political figures, or other cultural artifacts to reinforce their messages; e.g., The Clash's "White Riot" draws from the Brixton riots of the 1970s to address racial tensions and class struggles.
3. Rhetorical Questions and Repetition: Punk lyrics frequently utilize rhetorical questions and repetition to provoke thought and emphasize key points; e.g., in Rise Against's "Prayer of the Refugee," the repeated

refrain "We are the angry and the desperate" reinforces themes of resilience and defiance.

4. Narrative Voice: Many punk songs adopt a first-person perspective to establish intimacy and immediacy. This technique, combined with conversational language, creates a sense of shared experience between the artist and listener.

Each punk subgenre brings its own linguistic and thematic nuances to the broader punk discourse. Hardcore punk, for example, leans heavily on militant language and aggressive delivery to address themes of resistance and self-discipline (Dines *et al*. 2023). Songs like Minor Threat's "Straight Edge" use declarative statements to promote a lifestyle of sobriety and autonomy (Kuhn 2010). In contrast, anarcho-punk bands such as Crass employ more didactic and polemical language to advocate for anarchist principles and pacifism (Donaghey 2020; Moog 2023). Their lyrics often resemble manifestos, blending poetic imagery with ideological rhetoric (Van Leeuwen 1998, 2012). Meanwhile, pop-punk explores themes of adolescence, relationships, and self-discovery through colloquial language and relatable narratives (Way 2016). This subgenre demonstrates punk's adaptability, proving that rebellion can be personal as well as political (Dines and Bestley 2020).

Globally, punk has adapted to local contexts, addressing oppression and marginalization through multilingual lyrics and regional themes (Hebdige 1979; Sabin 1999). Sociolects, such as working-class slang and countercultural jargon, reinforce punk's role as a platform for marginalized voices (Gaballo 2012), while subgenres like queercore celebrate queer identity and resistance through terms like "queer punk" and themes of chosen family (Laing 2015). Wordplay, puns, and double entendre enhance punk's ability to critique and entertain, blending humor with subversion (Panek 2021). Additionally, the interplay between lyrics and music creates multimodal metaphors, amplifying punk's expression of rebellion, alienation, and empowerment (Way and McKerrell 2017; Zbikowski 2009). This evolution highlights punk's enduring relevance as a tool for cultural and political resistance worldwide (Faudree 2012; Geertz 1973).

The influence of punk discourse extends beyond music, finding fertile ground in edupunk—a DIY, anti-establishment approach to education that emerged in the early 2000s (Vass and Heffernan 2023). Inspired by punk's rejection of rigid hierarchies, edupunk challenges traditional academic models, emphasizing learner autonomy, collaboration, and creativity (Dines *et al*. 2023; Freire 1970). Just as punk empowered marginalized voices through its raw honesty and accessibility, edupunk empowers learners by fostering critical thinking and innovation outside conventional systems (Jagush 2021). Both movements share a commitment to dismantling authority, promoting inclusivity, and advocating for change (Furness 2012).

Punk's evolution from cultural rebellion to a pedagogical tool demonstrates its versatility and relevance, proving that its ethos can inspire resilience and resistance across diverse contexts (Dunn 2016). The historical evolution of punk discourse and its integration into edupunk reflects the enduring impact of punk's ethos on culture and education (Ebner 2008). At its core, edupunk is about reclaiming education as a tool for personal and collective empowerment (Jagusch 2021). Whether through grassroots community initiatives, digital platforms, or activist-oriented curricula, edupunk provides a framework for addressing the social and economic challenges of the 21st century. It embraces the punk spirit of rebellion—not as a means of destruction, but as a call to action, encouraging learners to challenge outdated structures and imagine bold alternatives (Furness 2012).

In a world increasingly shaped by rapid technological advances and growing social inequalities, the principles of edupunk remain vital. By advocating autonomy, creativity, and critical thinking, edupunk equips learners with the skills to navigate uncertainty and lead change. As it draws on punk's enduring themes of resilience and resistance, edupunk offers not only a critique of existing educational paradigms but a vision for a future where learning is accessible, transformative, and empowering for all.

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OPPOSITIONAL MUSIC MASH UPS
Populist Manifestations in Online Criticism to UK Conservative Government Actions

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Abstract – Globally, populism is on the rise, evident in Putin's Russia, Oban's Hungary and Trump's America. The UK's Conservative governments since Margaret Thatcher have also been accused of being populist, despite populism, in all its forms, being divisive and polarising. One sphere in which we find resistance to populist governments is digital popular culture. Though memes, mash ups, parodies, animations and other forms of popular culture on social media are dismissed by some as "just a bit of fun", scholars have shown how these can also be political, infused and shaped by power relations and ideologies. Leaning on Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies, this paper analyses written and spoken lexica, images and musical sounds in a sample of musical mash ups produced by @PoliticsJOE. This analysis reveals how these rely on forms of populism as they represent and recontextualise UK Conservative governments and their actions from 2019 to 2024. It is through such a close reading that I consider the role(s) such digital popular culture can play in public discourse.

Keywords: Brexit; multimodal critical discourse studies; music; mash up; populism; digital popular culture.

1. Introduction

Globally, there has been a rise in populism, characterised by elites who react to globalisation, liberalism and modernity as threats to national culture and identity. This is evident in Putin's Russia, Meloni's Italy, Orbán's Hungary, Modi's India, and Trump's America (DeHanas 2023; Freedom House 2022; Mudde 2016; Robertson and Nestore 2022). Despite its current appeal, critics point out how populism is divisive and polarising. The UK's Conservative governments (Conservatives) have consistently leaned on various forms of populism since Margaret Thatcher (Fieschi 2019). From 2010 to 2024 the Conservatives were also embroiled in political instability including Brexit followed by Prime Minister (PM) David Cameron's resignation; Boris Johnson's election, Covid 19 lockdowns, rule breaking and Johnson's subsequent resignation; the swift rise and fall of Liz Truss; the selection of Rishi Sunak as PM and his 2024 national election loss. One sphere we hear criticism about populists is digital popular culture, ridiculing elites online

being "one of the most important forms of political participation and activism today" (Merrin 2019, p. 201). This paper investigates how online mash ups shared widely on social media, criticise recent UK Conservative governments. Using Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies (MCDS), I examine lexica, images and musical sounds to analyse not only what issues and concerns are raised in relation to government actions, but also how these are articulated. Through these close readings, I reveal how these critiques themselves lean on populism. I consider the implications of such leanings in terms of benefits and harm to society.

2. Populism

Populism can be linked to a wide range of political stand points from the extreme right to the radical left (Scoones *et al*. 2021, p. 2). It is a divisive discourse that represents "popular interests and values" (Williams 1988, p. 238) with a universal "appeal to the people and anti-elitism" (Laclau 2005, p. 7). Populism represents "popular-democratic elements […] as an antagonistic option against the ideology of the dominant bloc" (Laclau 1977, p. 143), firmly "separating the 'people' from power" (Laclau 2005, p. 224). The "elite" and "the people" are not prefixed natural categories, but signifiers that acquire meaning through a diversity of discourses and contexts (De Cleen and Carpentier 2010; Laclau 2005, p. 74). So, who are defined as "the people" and the "elite" depends on who constructs these groups and for what purposes. This is demonstrated in studies on Belgian political groups (De Cleen and Carpentier 2010), Turkish politicians, protesters and musicians (Way 2018, 2023), the political left and right during Obama's 2008 election campaign (Jordan 2013), Donald Trump and musicians who oppose him (Merrin 2019; Way 2023), Greek politicians (Serafis *et al*. 2022), and Brexit Britain under the Conservatives (Way 2024). We find populism, in its various forms and accents, "has a chameleon-like quality which can adapt flexibly to a variety of substantive ideological values and principles" (Norris and Inglehart 2019, p. 3).

The UK's recent Conservative governments under Johnson, Truss then Sunak were populist. This populist turn can be traced back to Margaret Thatcher's brand of Conservatism and how she represented nationalism, a disdain for established elites, appeals to common sense, and hatred of the left (Fieschi 2019, p. 119). Conservative populism later developed into "a strong brand of populist Euroscepticism" in the late 1990s (Bale 2018, p. 266). Fuelled by years of tabloid news outlets "developing a terrain for populist argumentation", the divide between the "people" and the "elite" prepared the UK for the "success" of British populism and "its key manifestation …. Brexit" (Fieschi 2019, pp. 119-128). Since Brexit, UK populism has

continued from Johnson's "Get Brexit Done" to Sunak's and Home Secretary Suella Braverman's aggressive anti-immigration policies. Braverman's 2023 speech that spoke of "a 'hurricane' of mass migration", Sunak's targeting the transgender community, the Conservative's discourse on the nation and the exclusion of "immigrants, people of another race" are "textbook populism" (Rooduijn 2023, as cited in Henley 2023).

3. Role of Social Media and Mash Ups

A musical "mash up" refers to "sample-based music where 'new' songs are created entirely from 'old' recordings" (Maloy 2010, p. 2). In audio-visual online mash ups (hereafter mash ups), producers sample video, speech and music to produce a "new" hybrid of meme, music and video. These are viewed by large numbers of people who are "unlikely to watch a conventional political broadcast" (D'Ursa 2018). A prime example saw UK opposition leader (at the time) Jeremy Corbyn's face mashed onto rapper Stormzy to produce digital popular culture that "helped Labour's standing in the 2017 general election (especially among the youth)" (ibid.). Studies demonstrate the limits and potential of mash ups, these not necessarily "chang[ing] the world, [though they] engage us for a brief moment in affective populist political framings of current events…" (Way 2021b, p. 503).

Though well-liked, not all academics are optimistic about digital popular culture's political potential. It is accused of being a space where "gossiping is far more common and interesting to people than voting…. [and] embarrassing videos and body fluid jokes fare much better than serious critiques of power" (Boyd 2008, pp. 243-4). However, some of this is highly ideological, internet memes, for example, being a "public commentary" or a way "a society expresses and thinks of itself" (Denisova 2019, p. 2; Milner 2018, p. 2357). More recent studies demonstrate how politics are expressed in various forms of digital popular culture (Bouvier and Way [ed.] 2021; Way 2021a), even offerings that on the surface are 'non-political' are 'infused with ideas and values, with discourses about how we should run our societies, what we should prioritise, how we should communicate, and judgements about identities and actions' (Bouvier and Way 2021, p. 345). Much of digital popular culture does not communicate to us in logical well-structured arguments, but through affect, comedy and fun (Denisova 2019; Merrin 2019; Way 2021a; Wiggins 2019). Furthermore, studies have demonstrated how much of this leans on various forms populist discourses (see Dunkel and Schiller [ed.] 2022; Way 2021b). This present study reveals how mash ups articulate such discourses in order to consider the implications such media play in politics and society more generally.

4. Data and Approach

I have chosen to analyse mash ups produced by @PoliticsJOE, one of JOE's eight "vertical" platforms. JOE, founded in 2010 and part of Maximum Media digital publishing company, is a "Left-Center Biased" ("Joe.co.uk…" 2024) social media publisher. Its content is aimed at "serving the interests, passions and curiosities of the modern man" between the ages of 18 and 35, attracting four million monthly unique users ("About us" 2023). @PoliticsJOE boasts 471,000 subscribers with over 1760 videos on offer and 212,476,131 views at the time of writing. It distributes its content on its website, Facebook, Twitter, Reddit and Linked In. In 2020, the platform won the "Content Creator of the Year" award for one of its political mash ups ("JOE Media: Swedemason" 2020).

This paper considers a sample of mash ups dating from Johnson's 2019 UK general election win to the Conservatives losing elections in 2024. There are 41 mash ups from this time period[1], these referring to (1) scandals, (2) declining popularity, and/ or (3) unpopular political decisions. I examined all of these to inform my close analysis of two: 2019's "Jacob Rees-Mogg's message for the Common People" (Mogg's message)[2] and "Budget 2023: Don't Worry Be Happy - The Tories ft. Bobby McFerrin" (Be Happy)[3].

"Mogg's Message", an anti-Brexit mash up, has received 2,047,651 views on YouTube since its release. It is made up of visuals of politician Jacob Rees-Mogg (Mogg) *in situ* and edited onto scenes from Pulp's "Common people" music video, a simplified instrumental version of Pulp's original song, and "lyrics" consisting of manipulated Mogg speech. Mogg is a high-profile Conservative MP (since 2010) who has served as Leader of the House of Commons and Lord President of the Council since 2019. He is a symbol of privilege, being born into the elite, educated at Eton College and the University of Oxford and one of the highest-earning politicians in the country (Bennet 2018; Wilford 2017). He is idolised by right-wing, pro-Brexit voters, whilst reviled by the left for his support for policies that challenge workers' rights and benefits for those in need (Wilford 2017). Considering Mogg's social and policy positions, choosing to mash up Mogg with "Common people" is ironic, seeing as the original song is a critical examination of class in the UK (Keppler, 2018).

"Be Happy", released on 15 March 2023, is a critique of the Conservatives handling of the cost-of-living crisis, including its 2023 Spring budget. It has received 205,848 views on YouTube. Visuals see former and

[1] The links to these are: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSFI8zc9DUU&list=PLO2mmhF3LwFXQcUlJZ6vnwtmgd61RyDK8.
[2] The link is https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3TT1VE8Jq0.
[3] The link is https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvtSomaXKE8.

current (at the time of release) Conservative politicians speaking in public engagements. "Lyrics" are manipulated speech excerpts that form two lines that refer to political issues and/ or scandals followed by the refrain "Don't worry, be happy". The music is a simplified version of Bobby McFerrin's 1988 song "Don't worry, be happy". McFerrin's original was a positive "formula for facing life's trials" (Stitt 2012), while the mash up responds to a crisis arguably exacerbated by Conservative actions.

I approach texts using musicology-inspired Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies (McKerrell and Way 2017; Way 2019a, 2019b, 2021a). The analysis of lexica, images and musical sounds reveal how these mash ups recontextualise the social practices of Conservatives and "us" the people. Representations of social practices can be considered recontextualisations, that is, a construction that involves transformations (van Leeuwen 1993a, 1993b). Transformations are ideological with choices made that "selectively appropriate, relocate, refocus and relate other discourses to constitute its own order" thereby detaching or "abstracting" a discourse from its original "social base, position and power relations" (Bernstein 1996, pp. 47, 53). As such, recontextualisations result in discourses different from those articulated in original texts. In our case, the social practices of Conservatives and the British "people" are transformed and recontextualised into musical mash ups.

The analysis uses van Leeuwen and Wodak's (1999) four types of transformations that recontextualise social practices: Deletions, rearrangements, substitutions, and additions. In this analysis, I consider how the social practices of Conservatives and "the people" have been transformed in the mash ups. Specifically, I consider what has been included and excluded; how facts, events and issues are rearranged; what semiotic resources are substituted for social actors, their actions and events; and what reactions, purposes, and legitimations are added to the representation of social practices. Scholars demonstrate how all four of these transformations are not neutral, but suit text producers' interests (Way 2021a), transformations being "relate(d) to the interests, goals and values of the context into which the practice is recontextualised" (Bernstein 1996, p. 97). The analysis also includes an examination of how voice and musical aspects of the original songs are recontextualised into these mash ups, leaning on studies on the semiotics of sound (Cooke 1959; Machin 2010; Tagg 1984, 1990; van Leeuwen 1999; Walser 1995; Way 2017, 2023; Zbikowski 2015). A close textual analysis of both these mash ups reveals how they lean on their own brands of populism whilst criticising populist politicians.

5. Analysis

In all 41 mash ups across the sample, we find divisive discourses that clearly demarcate Conservatives as a despotic elite who are distinct from "us" the people. This is manifested in how both groups, their actions and their ideas are represented and recontextualised.

5.1. Two Distinct Groupings

In "Mogg's message", Mogg personifies the "elite". As he narrates the mash up, his lyrics construct a callous Brexit-supporting elite distinct from "the people". The pronouns "I", "we" and "us" name the former while "their", "them" and "the people" the latter. Alongside these namings, a Greek woman named as "she", "you" and "her" acts as a metonym for the people. Together, these names and pronouns construct a group of "us" the people struggling against Brexiteer-supporting elites.

In two scenes, visuals also play a role in constructing two distinct groups. Figure one is taken from a speaking engagement that sees Mogg wearing formal attire, including a black suit and bow tie. Clothes connote his "elite" status. He is activated "speaking to an audience" again connoting power. To the viewer's left, a spectator is salient through lighting, focus and central proximity. Unlike Mogg, he wears a dark T-shirt whilst frowning at Mogg.

This is an emotive reaction to Mogg, representing private feelings and suggesting weakness (van Leeuwen 1995, p. 86). Recontextualised as such, the boy is a metonym for the people, undermining Mogg, showing difference and disapproval.

Figure 1
Difference and disapproval.

Difference between the elite and the people is also emphasised in "Be Happy". This is evident in politicians' lyrics. For example, Sunak sings "Deep in debt and can't pay your rent, just eat some porridge and buy a tent…". Two distinct groups are constructed through the possessive determiner "your" that suggests there is a group that excludes Sunak. This "other" group is not well defined, though difference is suggested. The first phrase recontextualises how people were suffering with the cost-of-living crisis. During this time, household debt hit over two trillion Sterling,[4] whilst foodbank usage and rental defaults affected "one in 20 tenants" (Jones 2023). Here, @PoliticsJOE presupposes that debt and the inability to pay rent are common amongst "the people" and the solution is to eat and live cheaply. Though homelessness affects more than 300,000 people on any given night ("What causes homelessness", 2023), this is not how the vast majority of the public were experiencing the crisis. Joe recontextualises all levels of financial stresses the public was enduring to the most severe circumstances (homelessness and food poverty). This oversimplifies a complex economic, social and political crisis experienced differently across the UK. However, this does construct a group of elites who are very different than "the people".

Difference is further connoted through sound and visual choices of Sunak. The bass in Sunak's vocals has been almost eliminated making him sound "tinny" and small (Tagg 2012), while heavy auto-tune and echo make him sound unnatural, almost robot-like, not like a caring person (Way 2023). Between the phrase "Don't worry" and "Be happy", there is a long gap in vocals, drawing our attention to a lyric, image or idea (Way 2023). Here, the pause emphasises visuals that connote difference. Sunak looks down on us with a smug grin, articulating a discourse of privilege (Figure 2). Though the vertical angle of interaction allows us to easily identify Sunak, here (and throughout the mash except for two shots) he is in a chest shots, similar to shot types seen on television news. This is about formality. He wears a dark jacket, white shirt and tie further suggesting formality, not someone who is personable and sympathetic. The vertical angle of interaction of the camera points up at Sunak connoting power. In this case, misused economic elite power. Backgrounds of Lloyds bank and the CBI remind viewers of his closeness to big business and his past working for banks and hedge fund management firms. In the context of lyrics, images and sounds that suggest callousness such as suggesting we live in tents, the mash up connotes an elite, different from "us" people who cannot pay our rent.

[4] This is taken from a study by pwc. Link is https://www.pwc.co.uk/press-room/pressreleases/house hold-debt-tops-p2-trillion-for-the-first-time-as-new-data-s.html.

Figure 2
Smug elite.

5.2. Despotic elite

In both, we find not only difference but negativity surrounding the elite, a despotic elite being key to populism (Laclau 2005). In "Mogg's message", the elite are represented as powerful, manipulative and liars. Power and manipulation are seen in these lines that recontextualise the Brexit referendum: "We let the people have their say, then we convinced them not to stay". To "let" a referendum happen presupposes power. Likewise, to "convince" presupposes being powerfully manipulative. This recontextualisation simplifies positions on the Brexit campaign within the Conservatives, some of whom campaigned to stay in the EU. This also deletes any agency of the people, including segments of the population who supported Brexit. Also deleted are factors that led to a slim majority voting to "leave" the EU, including fear of foreigners, national pride and a distrust of the EU. Elsewhere, Conservatives are represented as liars in the lines "[We] Sold them falsehoods on a bus, deflect all the blame from us". This recontextualises the slogan "We send the EU £350 million a week, let's fund our NHS instead" written on the side of a Leave campaign bus. This campaign stunt is recontextualised with negative lexica of selling "falsehoods" and "deflect[ing] blame". Lines like these are severe simplifications of social practices that emphasise politicians' despotic use of power at the expense of a disempowered and victimised people.

Visuals include Mogg's head mashed onto Pulp's lead singer's (Jarvis Cocker's) body. These connote Mogg is absurd (Figure 3). Here, Mogg is salient through focus, lighting and central image position. In the original Pulp video, Cocker claims the dance being performed here represents the "stupid things you do" ("The making of…", 2014). In the mash up, this dance is recontextualised to ridicule Mogg, his feet kicking up like a Las Vegas chorus dancer. He wears Cocker's reddish-brown coloured jacket, black shirt

open at the collar and a tan-coloured tie. The dance and clothing ridicule Mogg's conservative image and dress style of three-piece suits that has earned him the nickname "the Honourable Member for the 18th Century" (Wilford 2017).

Figure 3
Absurd.

A number of melodic choices connote negativity surrounding Mogg and the elite. Like the original Pulp song, the mash up's melody is a three-chord progression in the key of C playing the first, fourth and fifth notes (C, G7 and F). Note choices carry connotations, these being heavily dependent on context (Cooke 1959; Machin 2010). The first and fifth (C and G7) anchor the melody, connoting stability, the everyday, but also the boring (Cooke 1959). The fourth (F) is associated with building or moving forward. In the context of negative lyrics and imagery, these notes suggest Mogg is not only boring, but also associated with negativity.

The song's instrumental and vocal melodies are fairly static. Figure four is a visual representation of a typical vocal line in the chorus. Most of the line is sung on one note (F) and then moves up one note twice to the G. A melody like this connotes "very little outward giving of emotion or positive energy" (Machin 2010). This is unlike the original Pulp song. In the original, Cocker sings the same few notes like "Mogg's Message" for the first minute and 40 seconds, connoting constrained emotional "coolness". However, in the second half of the original, Cocker raises his voice a whole octave, as the tempo increases connoting excitement, agitation and possibly anger. In the mash up, much of this is deleted as Mogg sings the entire song without a change in pitch, suggesting a lack of emotion, a part of his callousness.

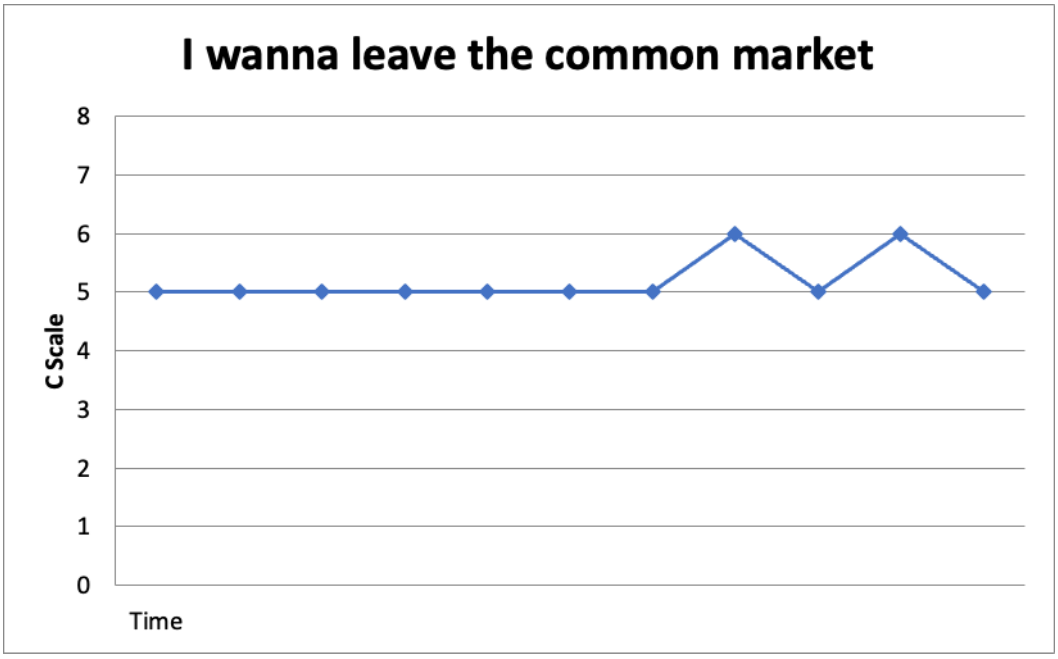

Figure 4
Static melody.

The manipulation of time also carries meanings: A slower tempo suggesting less excitement than a faster one, while a consistent tempo suggests an "unnatural" mechanical obedience to "the system" (Tagg 1984). In the original Pulp song, tempo fluctuates between 90 and 160 beats per minute, producer Chris Thomas claiming this was "absolutely intrinsic to the [song's] excitement". In "Mogg's message", timing remains perfectly consistent at a slower 72 beats per minute. This consistent tempo choice emphasises the idea that Mogg is uncaring and inauthentic by being part of "the system" while the slower tempo omits excitement, suggesting Mogg is a bit of a bore. Both these connotations are represented in the visual and lexical choices throughout the mash up.

In "Be Happy", similar strategies can be found across all three modes, though this mash up represents the elite as "out of touch", "insincere", "squander our money as we suffer" and "mad". An "insincere" discourse is articulated in representations of three well-known Conservatives: Jeremy Hunt, Nadhim Zahawi and Boris Johnson. In all three, we see each politician smile or laugh and then abruptly "turn off the taps" and frown. Representations of Hunt as insincere is represented multimodally whilst singing "Don't want to wait In A & E, Jump the queue Go Privately….". These lines that recontextualise the long waits people have to endure in public-run NHS hospitals presuppose that Hunt both favours private health care and this is something "the people" can afford. The former presupposition leans on popular discourses that see the Conservatives dismantling public health care whilst advancing the interests of private health care (Chakelian

2023). The latter presupposition articulates a discourse of being different and privileged, seeing as most UK citizens rely on the NHS for health care. Furthermore, the action "jump the queue" is a socially frowned upon action, presupposing Hunt is morally lacking, not to be trusted.

Imagery further emphasises Hunt is insincere and untrustworthy. As is the case with all the images of Conservatives, Hunt mostly looks off screen in "offer" images, omitting symbolic engagement with viewers (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001). He does not look at us "in the eye", something we expect when speaking to each other in Western cultures. In fact, Hunt quickly moves his eyes across the screen in seven of the 14 shots, all but one without looking at the camera/ viewers. In the last shot (Figure 5), Hunt looks at the viewer for a split second before his eyes dart to the left and down, similar to someone who avoids eye contact after telling a lie or being ashamed.

Figure 5
Insincere Hunt.

Throughout the mash up, musical choices connote negativity surrounding the Conservatives. McFerrin's original song starts with 29 seconds of high-pitched whistling. This is foregrounded in the hierarchy of sound, emphasising hope and positivity (Way 2021a). After 15 seconds and accompanied by visuals of three antagonists dancing together, the whistling sound doubles, both "whistlers" whistling the same notes at the same time. In the context of happy protagonists dancing together, sounds suggest positivity and unity (van Leeuwen 1999, p. 79). There are lower "rhythm" vocals in the original, though these are backgrounded. The overall atmosphere created through visuals and sounds is happiness and frivolity. In the mash up, this "happy" introduction is completely excluded.

Like the original, the mash up's lyrical structure consists of two rhyming lines followed by the refrain "Don't worry, Be happy". Between each of these, the original includes approximately 30 seconds of high-pitched singing of "Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh", extending to a minute at the end of the song. As such, almost half of the original song includes these uplifting sounds. Again, these "positive" sounds are excluded between lyrics and only heard in the last five seconds of the mash up, contributing to more negative

recontextualisation. Even these last "happy sounds" in the mash up are disrupted by a sound effect of a record being turned off, connoting this happiness is not "real", but a recording.

5.3. People as Victims

Much of populism includes representing the people separate from power and victims of elite actions. Again, we see this in both mash ups. In "Mogg's message", lexica rearranges social actions in ways that emphasise victimisation. Consider the first verse:

> "She came from Greece/ She had a thirst for knowledge
> I explained 'I went to Eton college',
> That's when she…/ laughed at me.
> I told her that my dad was loaded
> And how I'll profit if the pound imploded
> And then she cried/ Because her visa had expired."

In the first two lines, "a woman from Greece" is used as a metonym for a segment of "the people", people from countries other than the UK. She is represented positively wanting to learn, empowered in a mental process. This is very different than some Brexit (and racist) arguments that claim "foreigners" steal UK jobs and burden the welfare state. These lines are arranged directly before Mogg suggests his elite status in: "I explained 'I went to Eton College'". Here, Mogg is active connoting a degree of power while his elite status is alluded to in being educated at Eton, an educational institution associated with the elite. We also learn of his economic status in: "I told her that my dad was loaded". Though privileged, Mogg is delegitimised here due to his wealth coming from his father. This representation omits Mogg's success as a wealthy businessman. Arranged directly after a positive representation of a "foreigner", this verse emphasises difference and positivity around the people. But this verse also disempowers the Greek woman, creating sympathy for her and the people as victims. Both she "laughed" and "cried" are reactions to Mogg, a disempowered representation.

Furthermore, crying is a semiotic process associated with weakness and more with women than men (Caldas-Coulthard 1994, p. 306). Here, we learn of her emotional states, inviting us to sympathise with her and align ourselves with her point of view. The lines: "Then she cried … because her visa had expired" are arranged in a recontextualisation that directly links her reaction to her immigration status, it being the cause of her grief. Though Mogg is not represented as directly acting upon her visa decision, the action of "her visa had expired" followed by Mogg declaring "[I] Want to keep out…Foreign people like you" suggests a link between Mogg and the

woman's visa problems. Taking (back) control of immigration was one of the discourses of the Leave campaign and one of many reasons why people voted to leave the EU, some of this fuelled by racism (Shaw 2019). Here, the motive behind Mogg wanting Brexit is represented as racist, a natural sounding pause after this statement emphasising the line. As such, this first verse and chorus represent the people sympathetically as victims, while Mogg is represented as a racist, a recontextualisation that articulates a populist discourse of an unsympathetic elite victimising the people.

In visuals, we also find victimisation of the people. Figure six is a mash up of Mogg and a dance floor scene from the original Pulp video, this scene in the original used to highlight one aspect of "bleak" working-class life (Keppler 2018). In the mash up, this is recontextualised to construct a manipulative elite. Mogg is salient being centre stage and in the foreground connoting importance (Machin 2007; Kress and van Leeuwen 1996). Dancers appear in the background connoting less importance. They are powerless, reacting to Mogg by copying his dance moves (van Leeuwen 1995, p. 86). Furthermore, they dance with a lack of energy and conviction, robotically, and mindlessly. Here, the people are represented as powerless by metaphorically being manipulated and reacting to the elite's (Mogg's) actions.

Figure 6
Powerless people.

Deletions of sounds from Pulp's original song again suggest victimisation of the people. Instrumentation in the mash up is simple, unlike the original that has a large list of instruments that "filled a 48-track tape and created a multi-layered sound" ("Classic Tracks: Pulp", 2013). Though many of the tonal characteristics remain, many flourishes, instrumentation, and nuances are

deleted. This simplicity allows listeners to focus on Mogg's voice. Furthermore, simplicity connotes a high level of certainty or modality (van Leeuwen 1999). In this case, sounds enhance the certainty of lyrics and images about elites being callous, out of touch, and against the people's interests.

In "Be Happy" victimisation can be seen in representations of most of the politicians. A discourse examined here and noted throughout the video is "They are mad and their policies hurt us". This is seen in representations of Johnson, Braverman and Truss. It is Truss's representations that use all three modes to articulate this discourse. Negative economic repercussions of Truss's 2022 budget are recontextualised in her first line of "Brought the economy to its knees". This knee metaphor suggests the budget was a staggering blow to the people's economy and clearly puts the blame of the economic crisis on Truss. Though analysts, commentators and even Conservatives believed her budget was not good for the economy, the world was already in a financial crisis. Recontextualised as such, her ideas seem "mad". Line two's "I got a payoff as your pay's squeezed" point to difference and victimisation. "I" personalises an established policy that allows former prime ministers to claim "The Public Duty Cost Allowance". This is a payment of up to £115,000 a year to maintain former PMs' offices. There was an outcry about Truss taking advantage of this due to her very short tenure of 45 days and her attempts at cutting taxes (Forrest 2023). This is recontextualised as "I got a payoff", a binary opposite to "your pay squeezed". Though wages were struggling to keep up with high inflation, this recontextualisation over-simplifies the callousness and difference of a corrupt, harmful elite as they "hurt" the people.

Voice manipulation also plays a role in articulating a "mad" hurtful discourse. Truss's second and third lines ("I got a payoff as your pay's squeezed, Don't worry") are sung a full octave above her singing on the first and fourth lines. Tagg (1990, p. 112) observes how high notes carry with them potentially positive or negative connotations of effort, assertiveness and urgency, depending on context. In the original, McFerrin adds excitement by singing high notes on three occasions and using high pitched trumpet sounds between "Don't worry" and "Be Happy". These choices add energy and fun to the tune, accentuated by comical visuals. However, women singing high notes can be "belittling" and if also loud, "can invoke the 'shrill and strident fishwife' stereotype" (van Leeuwen 1999, p. 134). Truss's voice during these lines are an octave higher than the other lines, her voice sounding tense and sharp due to tension in her throat muscles. As such, these lines connote aggression and excitement, "not casual, laid back and informal" as suggested with a wide open relaxed throat sound (Fonagy and Magdic 1972, p. 286). With lyrics telling us about our financial woes, Truss's high notes accentuate her madness as she hurts "us".

Truss's voice manipulation and imagery also articulate danger. Women who sing in a low pitch can suggest a "dangerous woman" stereotype (van Leeuwen 1999, p. 134). We hear this in Truss's first line, accompanied by dark imagery (Figure 7), connoting evil and negativity (Machin 2007). Though salient, Truss is out of focus. She looks tired, her eyes cast down almost shamefully in a disempowering offer image (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2010). Here, lyrics tells us she has ruined the economy. She wears dark clothes and is not speaking in public, but "hidden away" in a radio studio. In line four's "Be Happy" again she sings an octave lower. As such, these choices emphasise the gravity of the situation we face with squeezed wages.

Figure 7
Victimising Liz.

6. Conclusion

The UK under the stewardship of the Conservatives endured scandals and crises, these criticised by many on social media. @PoliticsJoe is one space where critiques of the Conservatives have successfully reached large audiences on a regular basis. Our analysis reveals how @PoliticsJoe's music mash ups articulate highly political discourses about actors, issues and events. These lean heavily on populism, discursively separating "the people" from power and the "elite" (Laclau 2005). In these mash ups, the people are represented as victims of, and pitted against, an elite who act in their own interest and against the interests of the people. In "Mogg's message", discourses about Brexit are recontextualised in ways that see very complex issues oversimplified, relying on stereotypes of elites, groups of voters and a unified people. Brexit-supporting elites are callous and work against the interests of a victimised people. Analysis of "Be Happy" also reveals how all

three modes construct recontextualisations that represent the Conservatives as "out of touch", "uncaring", "insincere", "untrustworthy", "corrupt" and even "mad". Alternatively, "the people" suffer and are harmed by policies and actions by "them". All the while, in both mash ups (and throughout the wider sample) very little is said about actual budgets or specific policies. As such, this study confirms previous studies that demonstrate how "the people" and "the elite" are fluid signifiers that acquire meaning through particular discourses and contexts, echoing the claim that populism "has a chameleon-like quality" (De Cleen and Carpentier 2010; Laclau 2005; Scoones *et al*. 2021). This study adds to this area of research, demonstrating how populism is employed by those who produce digital popular culture that criticises powerful and populist "elites".

On a societal level, we find digital popular culture, such as these mash ups, are an integral part of our lives, informing, communicating and entertaining us (KhosraviNik 2017; Way 2021b). Though there are many sceptics in terms of its political potential (Boyd 2008), through satire, parody, affect and fun, digital popular culture criticises those in power (Denisova 2019; Merrin 2019; Papacharissi 2015; Vásquez 2019; Way 2021b; Wiggins 2019). In this study, I demonstrate how mash ups highlight scandals, controversies and the misuse of power. Though much of this makes headlines in traditional news outlets, mash ups open these ideas up to a wide, and possibly different, news-disengaged, audience. This role offers hope, despite the polarisation and divisiveness associated with populism. Online mash ups, and digital popular culture more generally, can contribute to public discourses, allowing audiences to laugh at, but also think critically about those in power. And this is where their strengths lie.

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MULTISENSORY OPERA
Enhancing the Senses for and with Persons with Visual Disabilities

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Abstract – Opera has long been a significant part of Italy's musical heritage, with its arias echoing around the globe for over two centuries. However, the availability of accessible operas for individuals with visual disabilities is a much more recent phenomenon, in Italy and Europe. Nonetheless, the response to these accessible performances has always been positive and the interest for them continues to grow. This article focuses initially on a shift in perspective in the concepts of disability, accessibility, and inclusion, as reflected in international legislation and directives, as well as in practical implementations of accessibility. The article then moves on to analyze experiences of inclusive design for accessible opera performances and related activities, where blind and sighted individuals collaborate for their mutual benefit. Central to this discussion are the notions of participation and inclusion, alongside theories of action research. In its final section, the article presents findings from surveys aimed at assessing the enhanced well-being and empowerment of individuals with visual disabilities who have actively engaged in the co-design and enjoyment of accessible operas.

Keywords: accessible opera; action research; creative AD writing; empowerment; inclusion.

1. Introduction

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, music is defined as a pattern of sounds, potentially coming from a variety of sources and combined creatively "to give pleasure to people". Moreover, as Helen Minors recalls, music makes meaning across sign systems and "the interpreter (the audience) is always dynamic and active in producing meaning. […] The audience is participatory in its interpretative role" (2020, p. 13).

Opera can be defined as a fully-fledged multimodal genre: music, singing, dancing, acting, to mention but its main features, all speak to audiences through an array of sub-codes playing simultaneously and reaching all our senses. As Burton states, in opera "words performed with music can express what language alone has exhausted, a combination that achieves an expressive and emotive intensity that neither words nor music can achieve alone (2005, p. 14). Moreover, although often considered an elitist, old-

fashioned genre, opera is extremely vibrant and relevant today, with more shows performed in Italy and throughout Europe in the past few years than a few decades ago.

An increasing focus on genre democratization and audience expansion across various countries and theaters has led to a proliferation of projects, further propelled by European directives, national legislation, and a gradual but consistent rise in funding opportunities. Among these initiatives, those aimed at individuals with disabilities have flourished, albeit unevenly, exhibiting significant diversity in terms of intentions, knowledge, funding, and overall awareness. Nevertheless, a noteworthy growth in these principles and parameters is being observed.

Turning to accessibility studies, the past decade has brought about a steady move away from the clinical concept of disability towards a social concept, whereby the latter (disability) is seen as a permanent or temporary condition that can affect us all, but also as a responsibility resting not with the individual, but with (a largely inaccessible) society. All of this has fostered a change in vision: disability is today no longer to be kept invisible, but rather the object of efforts to integrate persons affected by disabilities in as many cultural and recreational activities as possible. Thus, participation in relation to accessibility is today a buzzword, and a very positive one. However, a lot still needs to be done, and accessibility to entertainment, music and opera in particular, still have a long way to go in Italy and the world over.

This article analyses a series of methodological and empirical issues related to experiencing opera for persons with visual disabilities, through a series of strategies and practices that have developed over two decades. The result of a two-way approach that inevitably merges top-down and bottom-up processes, the action-research project presented in this article aims to inspire further multidisciplinary, multisensory developments in both research and practice.

2. From Accessibility to Inclusion, Participation and Empowerment

In recent years, especially after the adoption and dissemination of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) at the end of the first decade of this century, a revolution has occurred in relation to the notion of disability and, as a consequence, that of accessibility. As anticipated in the introduction, a clinical perspective on disability has been slowly but steadily replaced by a socio-cultural one, whereby disability is no longer an issue concerning only a few, unfortunate people, but rather society/ies as a whole. And it is precisely the latter, i.e. society, that has so far generally been built with *able* people in mind (Nario Redmond 2019). The

acknowledgement of the so-called social model of disability (Oliver 2013) by the UNCRPD has brought about a revolution, with a move from traditional, or segregationist (Gossett *et al*. 2009) notions of accessibility, towards more universalistic, proactive concepts such as inclusion and inclusive design. The latter, defined by Waller and Clarkson (2009) has the great merit and value of placing the human being at its core: as a matter of fact, the first of the five principles defining inclusive design is precisely *people*, followed by diversity, choice, flexibility, and convenience. All four principles that follow *people* are undoubtedly referred to the first one.

In the wake of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), several official documents released in recent years have reaffirmed and further emphasized the importance of placing the individual—along with their diverse abilities—at the center of any activities that pertain to them. This approach underscores the necessity of incorporating this perspective from the design stage onward, making it an essential element of the process. Recently, the first ever G7 summit on Disability and Inclusion held in October 2024 in Solfagnano, Italy, led to the signing of an important and inspiring document named the Charter of Solfagnano.[1] This document lays emphasis on the participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of life from its very onset (the word is used 15 times over 21 pages) and it relates this notion to the "enhancement of talents", i.e., the empowerment of persons with disabilities through real involvement and commitment. For the makers of the Charter, participation means granting the right to take part in decision-making processes at all levels and certainly to enjoy culture and experience beauty through all available senses. Participation and involvement are also central to the European Accessibility Act, which came into force in June 2025 throughout the European Union.

Thus, participation is indeed a key factor in designing and implementing what we will refer to as *inclusive access*, i.e. access to events and services that are designed, tested and enjoyed with people with different abilities, considering their needs and competencies and aiming to enhance their sensorial perceptions. Elsewhere defined as CMA, or collaborative media accessibility (Di Giovanni *et al*. 2023), this expanding area of research and practice is nowadays widely recognized by scholars in audiovisual translation and media accessibility, as well as in disability and cultural studies. Incidentally, one of the first occurrences of the notion of participation in conjunction with that of accessibility, in these fields of study, was inspired precisely by a hands-on experience in participation of children with and without visual disabilities in multisensory workshops connected to opera

[1] https://www.g7disabilityinclusion.it/la-carta-di-solfagnano/ (03.02.2025).

performances (Di Giovanni 2018) that will be recalled in one of the following sections.

As already pointed out, participation as we have defined it here very often leads to empowerment. For Lorenza Dallago (2012), for instance, participation means granting opportunities to poor or marginalized people to be involved in decision-making processes and projects, so that social rules and habits can be revised and spaces for new, inclusive debates can be opened. Still for Dallago, empowerment is explicitly based on participation (ibid., p. 79), however difficult—the author says—it may be to achieve it.

Offering a largely philosophical approach to empowerment for people with disabilities, Charlton arrives at a multifarious definition of the concept by first referring to the notion of "raised consciousness" (2000, p. 119): by working with others, people with disabilities "begin to recognize a level of universality" in what they do, or can do, that may have been obscured previously. Thus, the "nothing without us, for us" motto recalled in Charlton's book title clearly takes shape, and empowerment is further entangled with notions of independence and integration. By recurrently referring to empowerment for people with disabilities as a human right, Charlton states, quite simply, that empowerment implies conquering some power, and by reporting on experiences in inclusive access to opera as well as on feedback collection carried out on several occasions, we will try to demonstrate that empowerment happens and increases people's confidence and wellbeing.

But before embarking on more empirical considerations, a section on opera, music and access from a synchronic and diachronic perspective is needed.

3. Music, Opera and Accessibility: An Overview

In opera, music is enhanced and enriched by concurrent auditory stimuli: the singers and chorus' voices, the sounds coming from the props and settings, as well as a host of other effects that the creative team may design. Yet, opera is also extremely visual: since the early 19th century, and intending to appeal to as many people as possible, opera has been employing rich and creative settings, precious and innovative costumes, suggestive lighting effects and more. Today, in order to make the opera experience more engaging, captivating, and thorough, singers and chorus members are increasingly expected to be effective actors on stage while singing.

As Giulio Gazzi Casazza observed over eighty years ago in his many times reprinted autobiography *Memories of the Opera* (2022, p. 246), the success of operas has historically been due to the composers and librettists' great imagination and creativity, matched by powerful, creative new readings

by directors and designers. Opera represents a multifaceted form of entertainment that engages audiences through various modes of communication. As noted by Helen Minors (2020, p. 14), "opera projects its sense via different modes of communication," prompting spectators to explore a rich tapestry of cultural symbols, intertextual references, and trans-textual inspirations. Furthermore, Minors and numerous scholars, both within the realms of music and translation studies and beyond, have advocated for the application of multimodal analytical frameworks in the study of opera. This approach, while increasingly pervasive in media research, remains significantly underutilized in relation to opera.

Despite its long-standing reputation for exclusivity, opera is today perhaps more than ever aiming to appeal to crossover audiences, and not because the genre is suffering from scarce attention, as some may argue: worldwide-known venues such as Teatro alla Scala in Milan, the Opéra in Paris, the Grand Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona, to mention but a few, have been scoring great numbers for attendance in the past years. By way of example, in 2023 Teatro alla Scala hosted over 450,000 spectators, filling its 2,100 seats by an average 90% for every performance and pushing beyond the 10,000 annual subscriptions. Its *prima diffusa*, i.e. the screening of its season première on 7 December 2023, had 11,000 viewers in the squares of the city of Milan, outside and around the venue. For its 2022/2023 season, the Grand Teatre del Liceu managed to secure revenues for 52.4 million euros, with a positive balance—expenses excluded—of over 2.8 million euros.

But besides recalling the success of opera today, it may be worth looking back at the genre origins, its initial intentions and audiences. Although many music historians trace these origins in the plays of Greek dramatists such as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, who often combined poetic drama and music, the first instances of opera as we know it today are normally found in late 16th-century Italy, especially in the generous efforts made by the Medici family as patrons of the first Italian opera composers. At the beginning of the 17th century, the genre took shape and was soon marked by the works of great composers such as Claudio Monteverdi, still widely performed and appreciated today. Also, as is known, the first operas were composed for, and performed within noble palaces, but their true success came as they reached out to larger audiences and were performed in theatres, where people brought their own chairs or purchased boxes to be able to host friends and lovers, to consume food and drinks, etc. From the 18th century onwards, in an endeavor to make opera in line with the taste of ever wider audiences and to ensure its commercial success, the genre has witnessed the recourse to grand settings, costumes that reflect the fashion of the day, references to contemporary facts and political issues. And since the 19th

century, especially towards its end, opera has committed to reflecting real life issues to touch people's hearts more fully[2]. Such a tendency reached a climax with the Verismo movement and with great authors such as Mascagni, Leoncavallo and Giordano, whose work paved the way for many contemporary experiments.

If we relate opera more specifically with the notion of accessibility, here still intended in its broad meaning—i.e. the quality and possibility of being reached easily[3]—we come across a long history of attempts at appealing to audiences across the age and social status spectrum. A particularly noteworthy effort was made by the above-mentioned Giulio Gatti Casazza, who was general manager of Teatro alla Scala from 1898 to 1908 and then moved to New York to become the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera (the Met), a post he held for 27 years. Amongst his many merits, which included the establishment of compulsory Italian language courses for workers at the American opera house, Gatti Casazza initiated the practice of live radio broadcasts of operas precisely from the Met stage, with the aim to reach out to as many people as possible, beyond the theatre doors and in their daily lives. The first radio broadcast happened in 1931, on Christmas Eve, with *Hansel und Gretel* by Engelbert Humperdinck. This experiment was a such great success that it has continued over the decades, anticipating the now common practice of streaming opera performances from the most prominent international theatres, or showing them in cinemas worldwide. With specific reference to access for persons with visual disabilities, the pivotal work carried out by Margaret Pfanstiehl, an enlightened blind American, shares with Gatti Casazza's endeavour the recourse to the radio as a channel to disseminate the audio descriptions for many events, including operas. In 1974, Pfanstiehl founded an outstanding non-profit organization, the Metropolitan Washington Ear,[4] who is still active today and has been providing audio descriptions for operas and other theatrical performances since 1981, leading the way worldwide and functioning as an example for many. Incidentally, the use of radio channels to broadcast audio described performances has spread the world over and has also been used by many non-blind individuals.

Traditionally, strategies that have been employed to make opera accessible for persons with visual disabilities have focused mainly on audio description (AD), a form of intersemiotic transfer that turns images into "vivid narration" (Matamala and Orero 2007, p. 329). Today, AD has evolved in many ways, most notably in terms of textual structure and authorial approach. As for the latter, authorial or poetic audio descriptions

[2] https://www.albertozedda.com/lopera-lirica-e-il-suo-pubblico (03.02.2025).
[3] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/accessibility (03.02.2025).
[4] https://washear.org/about-us/ (03.02.2025).

seem to be increasingly common today, with some theatres and opera houses experimenting with, or favoring, a creative act that does not involve a trained audio describer as the primary agent (Romero Fresco 2021). Such an approach is as noteworthy as potentially misleading: a professional audio describer knows how to use her/his sources, when to consult with authors, directors, set and costume designers, conductors, etc., but s/he also knows how to integrate their views in a well-structured AD. Indeed, a professional describer knows how to make sure that the basic tenets of AD writing are always kept in sight, to guarantee that a clear, coherent, and smooth verbal representation of the most salient and relevant visual elements is provided. As for the recourse to different textual structures, some theatres have opted for introductory notes rather than full-fledged ADs, to avoid recruiting live describers or operators engaged during the actual performances. Introductory notes are not synchronized with performances and can be enjoyed before or after it. Moreover, some theatres have experimented with what is sometimes referred to as audio narration (Kruger, Orero 2010), i.e. a rather lengthy, narrative text that occupies more space than an AD would normally hold and becomes more than an accompaniment to a live performance, but rather a sub-performance in itself.

All in all, experiments prove the vitality and growing relevance of audio description for live events, opera in particular. As we will see more in detail in the following section, the enhanced sensory experience of opera is, today, not limited to the provision of audio description during performances: tactile reproductions of set designs, braille librettos, touch tours, and olfactory-based workshops are amongst the many activities that transform and enrich this live experience, some of which will be analyzed below.

4. Inclusive Access to Opera

This section focuses on inclusive access to opera for people with visual disabilities, in theoretical, methodological, and practical terms. As anticipated in the introduction, all examples of inclusive, multisensory access that will be analyzed in the following paragraphs were experimented with first-hand, as a natural outcome of my research activity but also as part of on-site experimentation at opera houses and festivals, i.e. as learning-from-doing activities. This twofold approach, which comprises both top-down and bottom-up processes, is intrinsic to my 20 years of experience in the design and provision of accessibility to live entertainment, operas in particular, an experience that has been progressing in parallel with academic research and training. Irregular though this approach might appear, it finds its roots and its methodological raison d'être in action research theory, as I shall try to clarify below.

Although it is most frequently paired with studies on education and pedagogy, action research theory has been widely applied to many other areas of inquiry, providing inspiration and methodological strength for researchers whose activities are not limited to theoretical speculations, but are always grounded in practice (Mertler 2019). As William Pasmore recalls in the *Handbook of Action Research*, one of the first, documented uses of the expression is found in the work of John Collier, "a commissioner of American Indian affairs from 1933 to 1945, [who] applied the term to his work in improving race relations between whites and native Americans" (2006, p. 39). More recently, and for a few decades now, action research has been employed in the healthcare sector, for example in the practice of cooperative inquiry that puts healthcare professionals together to reflect on their experiences, occasionally joined by patients too, so as to comprehensively redesign procedures and attitudes (Heron and Reason 2006, p. 146). As Heron and Reason recall, action research is, in itself, collaborative by definition. And this collaboration involves reflection and action, leading to further reflections and actions in a potentially continuous process that alternates the two not necessarily in a systematic way. Also, as the authors further clarify, action research is "research with, rather than on people" (ibid.), which applies perfectly to the activities and reflections discussed here.

Furthermore, action research has been often defined as *participatory* and it has, amongst its main objectives, that of "seeking to strengthen community ties and to heighten transformative potential" (Park 2006, p. 84). Essentially, in participatory action research, people use their insider knowledge and generate new knowledge by experimenting with, analyzing, systematizing the life of a community, a group of people. To use different words, action research is defined by many scholars as a powerful tool for "systemic change" (Calhoun 2019, p. 415), where change is generated through experience, experience is subsequently the object of analysis and reflection, and it feeds back onto the theory itself. Moreover, action is often synonymous with *social action*, stimulating critical thinking over established, hard-to-question sets of ideas, stereotypes and limitations. Thus, action research theory seems to provide just the perfect backdrop for this study and match the approach spelled out at the very onset: access has to be participatory in nature, a shared, joint effort for the benefit of all.

4.1. Audio Description and Beyond: Co-design, Co-creation, Enhanced Reception

As anticipated, the increasing proliferation of audio description (AD) for theatre and opera performances that has been observed in Italy and across Europe over the past 15 years has prompted the development of new

strategies for its creation and delivery. For the sake of brevity, this discussion will focus on two specific instances: 1) the co-design and co-creation of AD, and 2) the enhancement of multisensory materials and activities to support AD reception.

In the context of co-design, one of the most significant and frequently employed empirical strategies for creating effective and seamlessly integrated ADs is the collaborative writing and cueing process. This approach involves one or more blind individuals working alongside the audio describer. By fostering this inclusive collaboration at as many stages of the creation as possible, the aim is to ensure that the information conveyed in the AD is clear, relevant, coherent, well-structured, and minimally intrusive with respect to the performance on stage. As a matter of fact, this collaborative methodology has been utilized globally for a few decades, particularly in relation to television broadcasting (Benecke 2004). Since 2009, it has also been applied in Italy to enhance the accessibility of opera, starting with the Macerata Opera Festival and spreading through theatres across Italy. On average, in these co-creative processes one or two blind individuals actively engage in co-writing or revising audio description scripts together with non-blind operators, ensuring that the diverse needs of those who are blind or have low vision are fully taken into account. In practical terms, the workflow is generally organized as follows: a professional audio describer prepares a draft AD, based on the well-known strategies that involve collecting information about an opera performance, its history and structure, the nature of the production on stage, its creative team, set and costume design, etc. The same operator watches the performance more than once and drafts her/his descriptive text. A video or audio recording of the performance is shared with the blind person/s, as well as any available information about the production. Subsequently, this AD team meets up and goes through the AD text, discussing and revising lexical and syntactic choices, the length of introductory AD sections and in-show inserts, the overall coherence, clarity and effectiveness of the AD text in relation to the opera performance it describes.

To bring this shared, creative process one step forward, since early 2018 a team led by researchers at the University of Macerata has been experimenting with creative AD writing with blind and non-blind children (Di Giovanni 2018). Considering the age range of the people involved (6 to 14 years), this was initially carried out as part of a workshop aiming to bring opera closer to children and teenagers with low vision, complete blindness but also no visual disability, the workshop comprising manual and musical activities besides the AD co-creation. On that occasion, a draft AD text was pre-prepared by a professional describer, with introductory sections focusing on the opera plot, characters, settings and costumes. Within the context of the very first experiment carried out in 2018, the opera to be described was a

shortened version of the well-known *Carmen* by Georges Bizet, with changes to the original settings and story to appeal to children and young teenagers. A recording of this 75-minute performance was shared with the participants before and during the creative AD session, to discuss and revise with them all lexical, syntactic and semantic choices. As reported elsewhere (ibid.), changes requested by the blind and non-blind children cooperating in the AD revision often concerned the use of color references but also qualifying adjectives, elements that are frequently deemed delicate and particularly complex when drafting AD scripts. This inclusive experience, repeated several times since the first 2018 experiment, was soon expanded by having children and teenagers with and without visual disabilities record the AD clips with their own voices, to subsequently attend the audio described performance with family and friends and follow through their voices. Such a creative, playful activity was so successful that it has grown to become a regular offer at several Italian opera houses; it has also contributed to opening a career path as audio description speakers for two blind, young women (aged 16 and 17 on the occasion of the first experiment).

In relation to increased empowerment and wellbeing as a consequence of participation in the making of inclusive opera access, in 2022 the two blind, young women were asked to complete a brief questionnaire on three different moments in the planning, creation and enjoyment of audio description and one multisensory workshop for a new staging of Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca* at the Macerata Opera Festival, Italy. The questionnaire was administered in the form of the so-called wellbeing umbrellas,[5] designed in colors and printed in tactile format for this occasion. Selected for being particularly clear and practical, the wellbeing umbrellas aim to rate selected emotions on a 1-to-5 Likert scale; they are inspired by the well-known PANAS scales designed in 1988 by Watson et al. and many times tested, adapted, modified to fit specific circumstances.

The two tables below offer an overview of the results obtained for both participants, namely N.V. and V.A., and they clearly point to an increase in overall values from the first to the third moment. In the case of N.V., a progressive increase is recorded for "enthusiastic", but also "happy" and "inspired" score a steady increase from 4 to 5. Results obtained from V.A. show a progressive increase in values for "active", interestingly pointing to a growing sense of participation and involvement, corroborated by higher values for happiness and inspiration, most commonly used to test levels of wellbeing. The overall high values scored on all three moments for both

[5] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/culture/sites/culture/files/ucl_museum_wellbeing_measures_toolkit_sept2013.pdf (03.02.2025).

participants should also be related to the two young women having been involved in similar activities for more than three years (Di Giovanni 2022).

Meeting to plan accessibility *10/07/2022*	*Writing audio description, organizing multisensory workshops* *25/07/2022*	*Participating in workshops (as co-leader) and audio described performances* *31/07/2022*
Active 5 Alert 4 Enthusiastic 3 Excited 5 Happy 4 Inspired 4	Active 5 Alert 4 Enthusiastic 4 Excited 5 Happy 5 Inspired 5	Active 5 Alert 4 Enthusiastic 5 Excited 5 Happy 5 Inspired 5
4.16	**4.66**	**4.83**

Table 1
Results obtained from N.V.

Meeting to plan accessibility *10/07/2022*	*Writing audio description, organizing multisensory workshops* *25/07/2022*	*Participating in workshops (as co-leader) and audio described performances* *31/07/2022*
Active 3 Alert 5 Enthusiastic 3 Excited 4 Happy 4 Inspired 4	Active 4 Alert 5 Enthusiastic 3 Excited 4 Happy 5 Inspired 4	Active 5 Alert 5 Enthusiastic 4 Excited 4 Happy 5 Inspired 5
3.83	**4.16**	**4.66**

Table 2
Results obtained from V.A.

Moving onto the second element quoted at the beginning of this section, i.e. the creation and use of enhanced multisensory materials in support of AD reception, one experimental activity is here worth mentioning that was the result of a brainstorming session among people with and without visual disabilities. Upon planning accessible tools and strategies for two performances of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* at Teatro alla Scala in Milan, in early 2024, the issue of multiple verbal languages that would merge in an audio described performance appeared as a priority to be tackled. This *singspiel*, composed by Wofgang Amadeus Mozart in 1782 with a German libretto by Johann Gottlieb Stephanie, is often performed in its original version, and this was also the case for the staging at Teatro alla Scala, where the AD was nonetheless created and delivered in Italian. Therefore, after discussing possible solutions to the issue of linguistic inaccessibility of the

libretto with two blind people, a decision was made to experiment with the creation of a paratext, i.e. a voice recording of the Italian translation of Mozart's work published by Teatro alla Scala in its official opera book. To this end, an Italian professional voice talent, guided by an audio describer, an assistant to the stage director, and a blind opera lover, recorded the text following a series of ad hoc decisions. First of all, the voice talent would not employ the traditional neutral tone that is applied to audio description recordings; she would rather follow the rhythm of the plot and the music, so that listeners could engage with it more easily. Secondly, the recording of selected passages of the translated libretto was paired with the corresponding music excerpts, with the aim to facilitate understanding and recognition of those passages when attending the audio described performance. This recording, divided in chapters following the acts and scenes, was made available two weeks prior to the accessible show on the theatre website, for blind and non-blind people to use free of charge.[6] The feedback collection carried out after the audio described performances revealed that the recourse to this experimental tool merging interlingual translation, music and acting, was reported to be both useful and extremely pleasant by blind and non-blind participants.

Since this last, experimental instance of multisensory perception of opera was intended to be enjoyed before the performance, in the next section we shall explore other activities and strategies equally offered before accessible opera performances, to enrich the experience and enhance enjoyment and participation.

4.2. Multisensory Before: Getting Closer to Operas Through the Senses

In a book devoted to the discovery of touch and its importance in relation to art enjoyment, Grassini et al. state that languages are, in fact, artificial codes whose structure and intended functions are the result of human conventions, and therefore can be questioned, upturned, and certainly replaced by other conventions. After recalling the 1921 Futurist Manifesto on Tactilism, a groundbreaking contribution by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti that has not been duly appreciated, in history and the arts, Grassini et al. move on to state that accessibility to the arts is a social need (2018, p. 21), perfectly in line with the need for equity stated in Article 27 of the 1948 International Declaration of Human Rights. Theatre, the authors go on to argue, offers a global experience that engages the person as a whole, therefore not having to limit its perception to one or two senses only (ibid.). Touch is universally

[6] The recording is still available at: https://www.teatroallascala.org/it/stagione/biglietteria/la-scala-pertutti/accessibilita/materiali.html (03.02.2025).

acknowledged as being essential for blind people to experience life (and art) more thoroughly: in 1969, another great Manifesto was issued by artist Paul Neagu, whose title, *Palpable Art*, speaks out in favor of the recourse to touch in experiencing art beyond the no longer exclusive, or primary, visual perception (ibid., p. 61). And this attitude has been gaining momentum up to the present day.

Inspired by these approaches and by academic reports on tactile experiences in conjunction with live events, in 2012 I started designing and offering tactile tours at several venues. Conceived to enhance the opera experience for blind and partially sighted people, tactile experiences very soon appeared to please all participants, with increasing requests for attendance from people without disabilities. Touching settings, props, costumes, wigs, but also backstage tools to make the opera performance alive on stage has, since those early days, proven extremely successful and a great complement to any accessible live show. In the years that followed, experiments have been carried out to enhance the multisensory experience preceding a show, often upon suggestions coming directly from people with disabilities: touching the musical instruments as they are played, or the singers' shoulders when they sing, were added to pre-opera workshops at several venues throughout Italy from 2015, and they were opened not only to blind but also to deaf patrons, people with intellectual disabilities and all their accompanying persons. Feedback collection performed upon several occasions and reported in various articles (see, for instance, Di Giovanni 2022) generally confirm the positive impact of these experiences, most of which were designed precisely with people with disabilities. Along these lines, further experimentation has been recently carried out: on the occasion of a ballet performance, or an opera performance featuring dancers, pre-show workshops have been organized, to have blind and visually impaired patrons try out some moves and steps, with the help of dancers and choreographers. This was the case, for instance, at Teatro Pavarotti Freni in Modena in January 2025, where participants with and without disabilities proved enthusiastic and confirmed this datum in the questionnaires administered after the workshop.

5. Conclusion

The experiments briefly discussed in the final sections of this article have helped clarify how music and opera can reach and please all senses, regardless of each person's abilities, or rather encompassing potentially all of these abilities and engaging them in multiple ways. The past thirty years have been animated by what we could term the *for-all movement*, whereby culture has come to be seen as increasingly and necessarily open to as many people

as possible. This, as was stated at the beginning, is also the result of stimuli coming from international documents and directives such as the United Nations' Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Charter of Solfagnano, where the word disability is progressively being replaced by diversity and its valorization through participation. As Greco and Dubini (2024) observe, if cultural events have to be for all, this does not entail that they shall be denatured or trivialized; on the contrary, the two scholars state that culture is in a process of constant transformation and that the multitude of encounters amongst different forms of expressions increases the opportunities to merge languages, where "the point of arrival in one artistic or aesthetic research becomes the point of departure for what comes next" (2024, p. 113, my translation). These reflections take us back to the previously discussed, twofold approach that merges top-down and bottom-up processes in an ongoing experimentation aiming to enhance inclusive access to opera and to live performances in general. And if participatory action research provides a powerful framework for better understanding and strengthening such an approach, participation must remain central at all levels, from research to practice, so as to ensure that all voices are heard and potentially all people are empowered.

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A SYSTEMIC-FUNCTIONAL APPROACH TO MUSIC, MEANING AND MULTIMODAL TRANSPOSITION

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Abstract – The present study aims to make a contribution to multimodal studies adopting a systemic-functional framework to build a theoretical device that allows analysing music in multimodal constructions. Our proposal is based on Kress & van Leeuwen's model for image analysis (2005). Several categories proposed by these authors have been re-elaborated to fit a musical approach and new categories have been added following McKerrell (2015) and van Leeuwen (1999) perspectives. Our working hypothesis is that meaning in music is socially conventionalised and associated with meaningful constructions in other modes. Thus absolute music conceptualizations access multimodal levels of discourse as part of representations constituted by associated meanings in the different modes.

Keywords: semiotics of music; multimodality; music and discourse; meaning transposition.

1. Music, meaning and multimodality

The study of meaning in music constitutes a complex issue. It has been addressed since ancient times from many different perspectives and there still are but few points of agreement among them. Psychology, anthropology, aesthetics, metaphysics, semiotics, linguistics, musicology, and even epistemology and ethics have taken part in a debate leading to different directions at different times. According to Burkholder (2006, pp. 76), this discussion has brought very valuable insights, but it has not yet resulted in a clear description of a mechanism by which music conveys meanings.

If we consider music as discourse context plays an important role. Music can stand alone – as in absolute music – but is often accompanied by other forms of signifying: lyrics, images, actors that show body language, clothing, etc. Songs merge words with music; opera mixes words, music and visual aids, acting, etc. Audio-visual material presents a complexity that interrelates at least two ways of meaning. Nowadays music goes hand in hand with lyrics or images at least, frequently both, becoming a multimodal phenomenon in which meaning are construed by different modes, and each of them contributes with different features to build a multimodal meaning.

This research aims to make a contribution to multimodal studies adopting a systemic-functional framework for multimodal analysis (Kress and van Leeuwen 2005) introducing music as a significant part of the multimodal construction and, thus, addressing its analysis in a systematic way within multimodal contexts. Our proposal adopts McKerrell (2015) and van Leeuwen (1999) perspectives to construct a theoretical device suitable for music analysis as discourse. Our working hypothesis states that absolute music conceptualizations access multimodal levels of discourse as part of representations constituted by associated meanings in the different modes

2. The place of music in conceptualization

2.1. Image schema and blending

A possible approach that can throw light on how and why humans assign meaning to music is the study of cognition. Cognitive processes bond together experience and conceptualization. According to Lakoff (1987), our conceptual systems are organized in idealized mental models that function as pieces or packages of information – image schema—involving not only the verbal dimension. Accordingly, Antonovic points out that conceptualization present certain characteristics across languages that allow thinking about its bond with body experience:

> When musical concepts are constructed in different cultural circumstances, as in a scale that goes "up and down" in one language but becomes "thinner and thicker" in another – one might ask if the conceptualization is chiefly motivated by the speaker's knowledge of the mother tongue or if there might be higher-order, schematic invariants beneath apparently disparate cross-linguistic conceptual choices (Antonovic 2018, pp. 58-59).

Body experience seems to play an important role in our understanding of tonal music. Thus, image schemas mediate between our experience and the meaning assigned by conceptualization (Brower 2000, pp. 326). These schemas reflect basic features of our bodily experience of space, time, force, and motion. We experience space as made up of bounded regions, time as marked off into cycles, our body as centred, balanced, and extending upward from a stable ground and motion as following pathways leading to goals.

Mapping these features of our bodily experience of the physical world (the source domain) onto music (the target domain), yields the music-metaphorical concepts of musical space, musical time, musical force, and musical motion (Brower 2000, pp. 327). We experience bodily tension whenever we extend the body upward in opposition to the force of gravity, and likewise we experience relaxation when we allow the body to fall back

downward. We experience the body as maximally stable when its weight is evenly distributed around its vertical axis. We perceive motion as carried out by an agent who wills the motion to take place. Goal states tend to be maximally or minimally stable within a local context. The approach to a goal tends to be accompanied by an increase in tension and arrival at a goal by relaxation and the slowing and/or stopping of motion (Brower 2000, pp. 331).

Therefore, image schemas can be considered as a sort of multimodal mental representations: they are blocks of meaning containing different features emerging from our experiences with our bodies in movement, space, visual, sound, etc., and musical features can also be part of them. Following these different kinds of experiences, meaning representation can acquire different forms of materialization. It can be constructed through different interrelated semiotic modes.

3. Grammar of Transposition

In a simple way to put it we can say transposition is a social-semiotic operation through which meanings change from one medium to another (Bermúdez 2008, pp. 2). But there is more to it than just that. In the case of books and their transposition to films, the process becomes a little more complicated. In *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Joel and Ethan Cohen's film that constitutes a version of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by Homer, the concept of transposition implies a series of transformations over different elements: time, setting, the journey made by the protagonists, etc., and all these changes have an impact in the narrative.

But in that case, transposition moves from a medium constituted by one mode (written text) to a medium with multiple modes (visual, auditory, written). When considering multimodal texts, situation gets complicated: meaning does not pass from one mode to another untouched but it rather adopts the form of different containers by appropriating them (Lim and Tan-Chia 2023, pp. 89). Different semiotic modes construct different features of meaning, this is, meaning is not just represented by a different "channel" but rather a channel materializes one aspect of a particular meaning. In a politician's words, for example, we can identify verbal constructions of anger or hate towards particular people or groups of people. But in his/her/their face what we can see is a personal emotional reaction. We cannot find a mark of the recipients of those words of hate in the face, just the expressions of the person who is speaking. In this sense we may say that every mode constructs just a part of the global meaning.

Some features are common in certain modes while other features appear in other modes granting different possibilities for the collective construction. In the case of a song, the tone and quality of the voice,

instrumentation, tempo, particularities of the melody and harmony, etc. can provide an emotional frame, an idea of process or movement that frame the words in the lyrics and makes us interpret them in a certain way: as an agitated process in which tension is taking over, or a romantic atmosphere in closeness with a lover, etc. In sum, two meanings are associated to the concept of transposition:

1. Change of medium: from one text to another of a different kind. This may include intertextuality, as in the case of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*
2. From one materiality (mode in terms of Kress & van Leeuwen 2005) to another, in a single multimodal text. In this case, meaning is built through features of different nature: visual, auditory, tactile, etc.).

Note that case 1 includes the possibility of case 2, given that audio-visual material constitutes a kind of multimodal text.

Let's consider the song *Sympathy for the devil*, by the Rolling Stones, included in the 1968 album *Beggar's Banquet*. Its lyrics describe a first-person singular narrative in which the devil confesses his role in several historical facts while repeatedly asks the listeners to 'guess my name'; demanding courtesy as he implicitly urges them to accept a collective responsibility in the mentioned crimes. The tension-relaxation pattern created by the syncopated drum groove and the Latin percussion gives the song a kind of Voodoo vibe that contextualizes the words as belonging to the devil. Mick Jagger's voice sings the lyrics as if they were a plea, an appeal for compassion. His voice is tensed and rough and, although this could be interpreted as a construction of irony – the devil pleading – the effect is smooth and we must analyse music and lyrics together to detect it.

In 1994, Guns N' Roses released a new version for the soundtrack of the film *Interview with the Vampire*. In it, instrumentation sounded heavier, and the Latin rhythm is present only during the first half of the song while the remaining half adopts an up tempo form that increases the idea of speed. Axl Rose's voice, contrary to Jagger's, sounds louder and dirtier, almost like a proud scream, intensifying the irony effect and sounding as if the speaker – the devil – were mocking his audience. This construction is reinforced by the screaming laughs added by Rose's voice in a different track and sounding simultaneously to the main voice track. In the context of the film, the song musicalizes the final scene: Lestat, an arrogant vampire – the main character, played by Tom Cruise- reappears after being taken for dead. Showing his arrogance and pride of being alive again he warns his victim: "I'm going to give you the choice I never had" while putting a tape in the player. In this context, the irony in the song is reinforced by the tone in Lestat's voice as he speaks and his laugh is related to the arrogance of the character in the narrative of the film.

This example evidences how modes operate on each other and how

they can modify meanings in context in both the cases of transposition above described. An integrative approach towards meaning-making must be founded on a multimodal grammar rather than a grammar of language or an individual semiotic mode.

4. Systemic-functional analysis for music

As we have introduced it in a previous work (Forte 2023), our proposal aims to analyse music in multimodal contexts. This is pure music in combination with other modes; mainly verbal (lyrics and written text) and visual. For that matter we adopt some of the categories proposed by Kress & van Leeuwen (2005) for their systemic-functional for their image analysis, add the concept of tonal gravity by McKerrell (2015) and develop a model that can be used to work with music in the above mentioned contexts.

We consider the three metafunctions identified by Halliday (1985) for language and describe their possibilities in music analysis for two different contexts: pure music + lyrics and audio-visual material.

Ideational metafunction: the ideational deals with participants, processes and circumstances (Halliday 1985). When music is combined with images or lyrics, participants and processes are defined in a more detailed way. Participants are prototypically defined as actors, possessing agency -*agents*- or being affected by the actions or processes carried out by others. In terms of language, processes are described in terms of their nature: mental, verbal, material, etc. Cross (1999, p. 15) describes agency in music by its 'floating intentionality'. According to this author, music gives us the impression of a process but we cannot find a clear agent neither describes in detail what process is being developed. In this sense, music does not define participants by itself but constructs aspects of them when they are depicted in lyrics or visual material.

In the case of pure music with lyrics pronouns define the place of the participants in the narrative, as we will describe in the next sections. In the case of audio-visual material the case is a little bit more complicated. In the first place we distinguish whether music is part of the diegetic narrative or not. This is if the participants hear that music too then that music is part of their context. If the music is not part of the narrative – non-diegetic music – and only we as viewers can hear it, music is part of our context to interpret what we are watching. Given that sight is our dominant sensory system, visual mode plays a central role in the multimodal construction. If music is part of the diegetic narrative it can signal processes associated with different participants: it can construct a situational context: a participant can run avoiding a shooting while an upbeat music illustrates the rush. It can also

construct features of characters: the imperial march sounds every time Darth Vader enters the scene and is associated with this particular character.

Interpersonal metafunction: This metafunction refers to relations among participants established through the multimodal text. The categories we propose have been adapted from those presented by Kress and van Leeuwen (2005), van Leeuwen (1999, p. 5) and McKerrell (2015, p. 8):

- Act of demand: this category is taken from Kress & van Leeuwen's *gaze act* that states that an image may offer information or ask for involvement of the viewer when the participant looks outside the image. In the case of music, we consider that the tension prototypically created by the cadences keeps the listener in waiting for a resolution and in this sense music asks for involvement of the listener.
- Perspective and social distance: this category deals with the construction of the space made by the sound of the instruments. It can be an intimate situation in which instruments sound smooth and close or a public situation in which we can hear them from the distance.
- Tonal gravity: This is a construction by Griffith and Machin (2014) adapted by McKerrell (2015). It is based in the meaning attributed to the different degrees of a musical scale: tonic (anchoring note), supertonic (something unfinished or about to happen), mediant (a state of happy or sad/chilling note), subdominant (building, moving forwards or creating space Tonic), dominant (anchoring note), submediant (pleasurable longing, nostalgia), and leading note (wistful of painful).
- Voice quality and timbre: This category describes the sound of the different voices in terms of oppositions like tense/relaxed, rough/smooth, bright/opaque, high/low, etc.
- Modality: It is related to the concept of "naturalism" and representation in terms of degrees of truth. How "natural" or close to the original instruments' music sounds.

Textual metafunction: This metafunction describes the musical pieces in terms of text configurations according to their form and structure. Form refers to the kind of piece (symphony, sonata, suite, fugue, concerto, choral, cantata, minuet, song, score, etc.) and allows us to establish a connection between the piece and the social practice involved (Agawu 2008, p. 22). Musical structure refers to the compositional architecture: Primary form, Binary Form, Ternary form, Rondo shape, Theme with variations, etc.

4.1. Pop songs as multimodal context: No more I love you's

Pop songs typically constitute a genre that blends music with lyrics. On the one hand, words are clearly verbal but, on the other hand, being sung instead of spoken, melody – a musical feature - is added as a supra-segmental

phoneme in the form of intonational curves.

No More 'I Love You's is a song written by British musicians David Freeman and Joseph Hughes and recorded by them as the Lover Speaks. It was released in June 1986 but was covered by the Scottish singer Annie Lennox for her 1995 album Medusa. Lennox's version shows differences with the original in several features: tempo, harmonic structure and melodic line. Instrumentation includes synthesized strings, a choir that functions as melodic base, and electronic percussion. Over this, the leading voice sings the main melody.

In the ideational metafunction, the presence of lyrics makes possible to identify one participant a narrator in the first-person singular:

> I used to be lunatic from the gracious days
> I used to be woebegone and so restless nights
> My aching heart would bleed for you to see
> Oh, but now
> (I don't find myself bouncing home whistling buttonhole just tuning me on)

The narrative is thus defined by this "I" as subject, agent and experiencer of what is narrated. Instrumental music adds the idea of developing movement to the processes narrated. The choir starts singing "do bi do bi do do do, oh" eight bars before the leading voice, establishing itself as part of the harmonic base. At the end of the verse, the "do bi do bi…" becomes "I don't find myself bouncing home whistling buttonhole just tuning me on…" and then the voices disappear to give way to the leading voice singing the soft version of the chorus (with a soft percussion section). After the chorus, the choir reappears to sing the line "*the lover speaks about the monster*" prior to the start of the second verse in which it goes back to "*do bi do bi…*" Once again, at the end of the verse the choir changes "*I don't find myself bouncing home whistling buttonhole just tuning me on…*" and the chorus starts again. This time, the choir does not disappear but instead sings background voices: uh uh. In the last repetitions of the chorus, after the coda, the choir track is duplicated, and some voices sing *uhuh*, while others go back to the *do bi do bi…* until the end of the song.

This structure builds a situation in which both voice lines compete - sometimes singing at the same time, sometimes not- for the supremacy in the harmony, although the leading voice clearly wins. This generates an effect of the leading voice representing the "I" in the lyrics while the choir is some kind of alter ego, consciousness voice or external element to that "I". The leading voice is not dialoguing with the choir but, instead, the choir is reinforcing what the leading voice is narrating.

In the interpersonal metafunction the act of demand is constructed symmetrically in each verse. The song is in Eb but at the end of the verse, at the beginning of the line "Oh, but now, (I don't find myself bouncing home

whistling buttonhole just tuning me on)" prior to the chorus, there is a modulation to Cm7 that ends in F7sus4, in wait for resolution. The modulation starts in the submediant and holds at the supertonic. At the macro-structure, the song creates tension (demand) at the end of every verse and offers full resolution in the chorus, so the tension keeps going until the coda, where something similar occurs, only this time the modulation goes to Ab and the line ends up resolving in the chorus again, back to Eb. Thus the song provides a more or less stable structure that presents tension resolved almost immediately.

Social distances in the song also play an important representational role. The voice tracks begin at a personal distance; as talking with someone who is near but not extremely close. In the verse, the voice sounds as in relatively close conversation. During the chorus volume raises and seems to be reaching a public distance, a little further away. Finally, in the end, the voice adopts a very smooth tone, posing an intimate distance at the very last line of the song

Tonal gravity articulates the mood of the song. The tonic of the song is Eb. There is a first modulation is to Cm7 (submediant) in the pre-chorus; and the coda goes to Ab (subdominant). The modulation to the submediant creates a sense of longing or nostalgia that is solved returning to the tonic in the chorus. The submediant waits for the chorus creating some kind of longing for it. On the other hand, the modulation in the coda, to the subdominant, creates two different paths: first a sense of moving towards a goal but also, detouring the way by following a different tonality, seems that the goal is a different one than the originally posed, the tonic. Even though, the coda ends up resolving again in the tonic.

In terms of voice quality and timbre all voices in the song sound smooth. Choir is high pitch while leading voice goes around medium to high pitch; ending in a somehow broken voice in the final line of the song, coinciding with the intimate distance constructing a somehow sad end.

The naturalistic modality is recognizable by the voices that, although worked artificially, try to emulate a state of purity with no identifiable effects on them. Synthesizers add a technological feature. Nevertheless, they are emulating strings and not introducing a technological or futuristic sound in the song. The human voices sound close to real and with no fictional effects.

The musical form -textual metafunction - is pop song, a format that was, at the time of the release of the song, distributed through physical formats (cassettes, CD's, vinyl). As a pop song it was widely spread. Its topics – in lyrics and music – tend to be known elaborations of previous themes, ideas that are already present in the common sense of the western society: the disenchanted lover of the lyrics and the pattern tonic-dominant-subdominant are present in many hit pop songs (Knocking on Heaven's Door by Bob Dylan, Don't Tell Me by Madonna, to name a few).

The musical structure is ABABCBB, ternary form that includes verse,

chorus, and coda. The chorus is based in the same melody than the verse, making it expectable, at a certain degree. Some arrangements – and of course the melodic line of the voice - remark its importance and differentiates it from the verse but instrumental melody is basically the same. Its simple format makes it acceptable for a massive public.

As we can see through the analysis of the three metafunctions, lyrics and music interact to construct meaning that neither of both modes can convey by itself.

4.2. Music and images: audio-visual material

In audio-visual material the visual mode can conflict with verbal and musical clues. Also, each audio-visual genre presents its own particularities. Considering this last issue we analyse two common genres: documentary films and cinema.

4.2.1. Documentary films: Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret

This genre constructs meaning as verisimilar as possible; the aim is to show "the truth" about something and, therefore, the use of semiotic resources is related to that. *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* is a documentary film produced and directed by Kip Andersen (who also appears in the screen as interviewer and host) and Keegan Kuhn. The film explores the impact of animal farming in climate change and the politics and NGO's attitudes towards it. As a characteristic of the genre, there is very few music in the film and all of it is non-diegetic (not part of the world of the participants represented. Only we, as viewers can hear it). Often considered as emotional bias, documentaries tend to use almost no music but many ambient sounds in order to construct closeness with their object.

In the ideational metafunction analysis can be seen that music is non-diegetic and serves two purposes: adds a feature in the construction of participants and marks the morally right or wrong in the desired interpretation of the words of the interviewed participants. The film begins with the words of Bruce Hamilton, from Sierra Club, about the seriousness of climate change and its impact of species extinction. During this part, background music is like a growing buzzing that eventually becomes disturbing. After a few minutes, the interviewer, out of camera, asks *"what about our lifestyle?"* and the music suddenly stops and silence is set for a few seconds, signalling the direction the documentary will take and the gravity of it. Music resumes after that but now is a folkloric theme during the opening credits of the film and the presentation of Kip Anderson, co-director of the film and protagonist. This kind of folk, country guitar music serves to establish a traditional mood while Kip presents himself as an average American kid: father in the military,

mother teacher, and a simple life. Following this scene, he mentions a break in his world-view when he watched An Inconvenient Truth, Al Gore's film about climate change. Here music turns to string section playing with a gravity that marks the seriousness of the situation. Then goes back to the folk theme when Kip says that he became OCE (Obsessive Compulsive Environmentalist): the music relates to his identity. Then back again to the gravity when he starts to think there's more to the story: *"...farmed animals are the main contaminant and nobody, not NGO says anything…"* Here music stops. Kip talks about the huge amount of water consumption farmed animals do and Heather Cooley's (Pacific Institute) interview starts talking about how harmful animal husbandry is. Still no music is played.

The folk theme in the intro presents the protagonist and associates him with traditional values in the US. Music changes when Al Gore's film comes into screen. Its gravity slowly surrounds everything while the protagonist talks about global warming and human responsibility. Folk theme comes back when the narrative turns to the ecological practices of the protagonist after watching Gore's movie. Gravity comes back when talking about animal farming and CO2. Interviews have no background music but it reappears at the end of some of them adding gravity to their words. So used, music identifies participants and circumstances.

The interpersonal metafunction shows constructions that combine music with the images. In the act of demand, the folk theme does not present extra tension; this is, other than the basic tension that constructs the theme, there are no cadences or melodic ruptures creating extra-tension. In the orchestral theme, on the other hand, cadences do not resolve. This resource is used to leave the images and the words of the interviewed persons in tension and in waiting for a resolution that exceeds the musical dimension. This resource creates tension not only in music but on the screen, making an uncomfortable situation for the represented as well as for the interactive participants (the viewers).

This tension in the act of demand is combined in turn with perspective and social distance construction. The growing buzzing and the music that marks gravity establish a public distance that calls for attention. They resemble an uncomfortable public situation. On the other hand, when the folk theme enters presents a closer situation but not an intimate one.

Tonal gravity is part of a complex construction. During introduction, when Bruce Hamilton is being interviewed and talking about how climate change is getting faster and impacting nature, species and extinction, synthesized strings play a raising melody with chromatic notes, adding some dark urgency due to the melody but also to the dynamics of instrumentation. When the interviewer asks *what about our lifestyle?* Music stops, along with Hamilton's enthusiasm. He replies *What about it?* And then the screen turns black and the folk theme starts to sound while titles and presentation is shown

on the screen. During the presentation, images show earth turning, cars moving at full speed, landscapes, bees and flowers, etc.; and all this while the folk theme sounds. In the moments of tension music is constituted by synthesized strings playing a melody that goes from the tonic to the dominant creating the major tension possible. Folk music is used to relax, opposed to tense strings; although folk theme stills keeps an up tempo that maintains the urgency. Regarding voice quality and timbre, it must be mentioned that all music is instrumental, no lyrics. In the folk song it can be heard a smooth staccato and some legato resources. The orchestral pieces present more legato than staccato. In the folk theme, modality is naturalistic. Just an acoustic guitar with no effects added. The gravity theme, on the contrary, includes some technological features that give the sense of futuristic music.

The pieces present belong to two different genres: folk song and orchestral music. The folk song presents an AAA structure, this is, a primary form. The orchestral piece is only heard partially: the cadence. It is impossible to identify what type of structure it presents.

In this documentary, music blends with the visual and verbal elements to co-construct key meanings in particular parts of the film, adding features that cannot be added by other modes.

4.2.2. Music in cinema: The Last of the Mohicans

In artistic cinema, music constitutes a very different resource than what it is in documentary films. It often presents a score written particularly for the film that covers the complete cinematographic sequence. In the case of *The Last of the Mohicans*, the score was written by Trevor Jones and is a construction based on a folkloric theme, re-elaborated during different stages of the narrative. Here we analyse the segment called *Promentory* and its functioning during the final chase in the last minutes of the film. During the entire film music is non-diegetic, combined with ambient sound. We can actually hear what characters are doing: footsteps, grasps, screaming, etc. Only in the scene when the characters of Cora and Nathaniel make love the motive starts as diegetic and becomes non-diegetic as the scene develops.

Ideational meaning is structured through the main musical motive that runs through the whole movie with different variations in melody and instrumentation. It harmonizes the folk melody using i-VII-III-VII-i, to make the tonal centre shift between the minor tonic (i-D minor) and its major relative. The topic seems to refer to the massacre and despair in the narrative. Therefore, the motive is tied to tragedy as a process more than to a specific character. It starts at the beginning of the movie, with the initial credits. As it appears in different moments during the film, it generates an accumulation effect that never reaches its peak until the final scene, when music drives the narrative to its very definition. In this scene, music starts after the elder's

sentence and marks definiteness in the fate of the characters: from that point on everything is an inevitable march to death.

Although there is an almost constant string section that presents a melody in competence with the main motive, in certain moments – coinciding with particular changes in the visual action – this string section raise over the violin line. This occurs in two types of situations:

- When big mountain landscapes are shown in the screen. Symphonic music has been usually used by cinema as a synonym for enormousness, majesty and inevitability.
- At definitive moments in the narrative: when characters die. After each of the two first deaths, the violin motive is resumed, illustrating the pursuit, until the final death in with the strings take over to end the music and the scene in the tonic upper octave.

The constant repetition of the motive builds the idea of persistent movement, which is directly related to the chase: four characters – Cora Munro, played by Madelene Stowe, Hawkeye-Nathaniel, played by Daniel Day-Lewis, Chingachgook, played by Russell Means, and Uncas, played by Eric Schweig - are chasing a group of Hurons (whose leader is Magua, played by Wes Studi) that held Cora's sister – Alice Munro, played by Jodhi May) as hostage. Music illustrates the chase as a process adding intensity, constancy and inevitability but also a solemn atmosphere to the scene. In this sense, it refers to the particular context, participants and processes involved in the screen but also to the whole situation created by those events: the war in North America between the English and the French and the involvement of the North American natives.

The interpersonal metafunction is also musically tied to the main motive. A small sense of tension is created through an authentic cadence that configures an act of demand. Although, as the motive repeats constantly and the resolution is full, the sense of tension is quickly lost. What transmits tension in a more profound way is the raising in the strings section that slowly grows bigger until it takes over the main motive, imposing a power over the situation that diverts the attention from the characters: the motive moves to the background and the lead is taken by melody posed by the strings. The structure of theme with variations gives the melody an aura of increasing tension by addition: new elements added to a known context make us think of a worsening situation, an issue that urgently needs to be solved.

In terms of perspective and social distance, music starts somewhere in the middle of personal-informal distance and, with the entering of the strings, it goes to public. This journey through personal-informal-public distances helps build the idea that the tragedy is as personal as collective.

Regarding tonal gravity, the motive follows the pattern i-bVII-III-bVII-I. The tonal centre oscillates between the tonic (D minor) and its major

relative (the mediant, F), granting some sense of persistent sadness to the melody. Violins sound tense, in terms of voice quality, but at the same time smooth and not too bright. The collective sound rises from low to high pitch, as the strings gain strength. Finally, the piece presents a naturalistic modality. Instruments are not modified in a non-naturalistic way and notes are articulated in legato / tenuto form with some sustain in the articulation. The opposition motive-string section creates a kind of shadow-light structure that develops through the harmony, giving dynamics to the whole piece and avoiding the use of modulation.

Although it is a soundtrack and, therefore, has been developed to maintain some connection with what happens on the screen, the piece can be thought as an independent orchestral work based on a folkloric motive. Textually we can say it evidences a structure of theme with variations. The repetition often presents the exact same pattern. But every now and then the last bar is altered by a few notes. As we mentioned above, this gives the melody an aura of increasing tension: new elements added to a known context make us think of a worsening issue.

In this film, music becomes part of the narrative, adding an element that only music can bring: tension. The emotional mood of the situation and the links with the represented participants make it an indissoluble part of the scene.

5. Music, cognition and representation: a grammar of transposition

In multimodal constructions, music helps constructing participants and processes. Although it cannot configure them by itself, music contributes with features that can be fundamental for the identity of represented participants and the processes they are involved in. Also, music constructs the situation, the social space in which the participants live and their relations with each other and the viewer/listener. In this sense, music establishes the emotional moods for the represented and for the interactive participants. Finally, music also tells us something about the conventionalisation of the situation in which it participates due: specific genres in specific social contexts.

In *No more I love you's* music constructs emotionality in the narrator's voice, transforming the words in an emotional state of mind. The melody creates a sense of recurrence by repeating the verse structure adding something each time to build increasing tension. During this process, public and intimate contexts are constructed, getting us closer and apart in key moments of the song. In *Cowspiracy*, music constructs the director's perspective: judgment over the words of the interviewed, arguments in favour

or against them. The different music tells us the role of the participant in the narrative is. *Mohicans* music is not just a feature of the characters or the situation, it becomes a fundamental part of the narration, connecting participants, processes, emotions through rhythm and giving the story and the characters an epic aura.

In all, music is a conventionalised construction, accepted in a given community as carrier of particular meanings. Every piece of music, every musical phrase, short progression, etc. has a history in each community through which it becomes associated with particular ideas. In that sense music can be thought as discourse or, at least, part of it. But there is a particular contradiction in human multimodal information decoding: while our dominant sense is sight, we grant a higher value to the verbal messages we hear. Verbal dimension seems to lead our interpretation in most cases. So considered, we can think about the existence of a hierarchy in the selection of modes for decoding: in every multimodal text there is a leading mode and accessory modes. Meaning moves from the leading mode to the rest adopting the possibilities they offer: if the leading mode is verbal, pronouns and nouns will be assigned as the representation of participants and music as a part of the process. If the leading mode is visual, music can be a feature of the process or add some participants' characteristics.

In any case, it is undeniable that music constructs discursive meaning in multimodal contexts and its importance in discourse analysis cannot be avoided. Therefore, future developments must point to the conventionalization of musical constructions and their relation with other semiotic modes.

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THE CLOSE LINK BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND MUSIC

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Abstract – It is a well-known fact that the relationship between music and the sound of speech must involve the music of the language which, like language, functions on two axes: one is horizontal and concerned with sequences, and the other is vertical and permits the production, selection, and availability of sounds and phrases. There is, indeed, a close link between the phonic system of a language and the structure of its music, and this can be shown by comparing both systems. The present chapter explores music, and songs in particular, to demonstrate the placement of word stress, syllable structure, metrical structure, and various prosodic features which are components shared by the two domains. For example, introducing the rhythm of English and suprasegmental features in both the linguistic and musical descriptions of a sentence/utterance or lyrics line may bring to light relevant aspects of both areas. Also, this text seeks to broaden our understanding of the phonology of English and expand upon the correlation between the musical and linguistic systems, and may contribute to supplying foreign learners of English with specific and perceptual reference points.

Keywords: phonology; music-speech relationship; English rhythm; word stress; metrical structure.

1. Introduction

It is quite understood that the relationship between music and language involves complex and meaningful sound sequences which invite comparison between the two domains. According to Tomatis (1977), for example, language is music and is learned like music. Rousseau, the Enlightenment philosopher, in *Essai sur l'origine des langues* ([1753] 1993) writes: "Dire ou chanter étaient autrefois la même chose" ("Speaking or saying used to be the same thing").The recognition that there is an obvious link between the phonic system of a language and the structure of pieces of music can also be seen in musical compositions (instrumental music or songs). Indeed, Patel (2007) conjectures that composers (or song writers) have internalized the rhythmic and intonation patterns of their native languages from an early age, and that shows in their compositions. When they write their music, they have these patterns in their ears, and draw on them in composing their work (cf. also Grout and Palisca 2000).This implies that there is a tenuous connection between linguistic and musical features, mainly, but not only, phonological.

This link is pregnant in folk music: for example, Scotland's folk song collections derive partly from the Highlands, where Gaelic speech and song contribute a characteristic rhythmic and sound pattern, and partly from the Lowlands where Scottish folklore and customs have produced popular tunes and poetry (Deas 1955, p. 210), as it may account for the reflection of speech in music. Likewise, the staccato of Japanese speech is reflected in its traditional music, and flamenco artists and *aficionados* know that the language (i.e. the pronunciation and rhythm of Andalusian Spanish) has played a fundamental part in the constitution of the musical language for the traditional flamenco chant or *cante* (cf. for instance *Flamenco Magazine*, 2013). Here must also be mentioned the commonly held views of language pleasantness-unpleasantness, which suggest a close relationship between a language and its musicality (cf. Giles and Niedzielski 1998, p. 85-93).

In English, rhythm and intonation are defined as important prosodic features (cf. Carr 2012; Hasty 1997; Larroque 2021; Roach 2009; Schlüter 2005). They contribute to the intelligibility of utterances. [1] Having recourse to music, moreover, may help foreign learners of English in their acquisition of the language (cf. Brown 2024; Graham 2002, 2006; Parkinson and Vyner 2024), or people with a stammer to overcome their speech disorder (cf. Tom Hooper's movie *The King's Speech*[2], 2010). In truth, the main difficulty for learners, especially French-speaking ones (cf. Carr 2012; Huart 2010), stems from the fact that they have no rhythmic references on which they can rely to organize their oral performance and stress the words or group of words to form utterances (in French, the stress always falls on the final syllable of the word as compared to the stress pattern of English words); as for music therapy, singing without a stutter, for example, may help with the fluidity of the speech production and reinforce the patients' confidence and motivation. Fluidity involves a 'normal' (that is, neither too fast nor too slow), regular cadence, which may fluctuate according to environment and influences such as emotions or feelings. Singing, for instance, may prove valuable for treating stuttering. Songs are indeed concerned with words and music, and text setting requires a constant interplay between the two: on the one hand, musical and linguistic groups must match, and, on the other hand, stressed syllables must fall on strong beats (Dell and Halle 2005, pp. 1-2), which may be one of the reasons why translating songs, for instance, is such a difficult exercise.

Giving emphasis to strong beats, that is, producing particular words or syllables with greater force than other words or syllables in utterances, can be defined as stressing, which is a prosodic feature of English. This could be illustrated, for example, by referring to the rhythm of blues (or of rock 'n' roll

[1] Although this may apply to all languages.

[2] The movie was inspired by a series of announcements by King George VI who overcame his stammer as he took throne when his brother, Edward VIII, abdicated in 1936.

which is the speeded-up version of it), insisting on the alternating pattern of strong and weak beats which characterizes the way blues words are sung. This view has the double advantage of showing the natural relationship between language and music and of illustrating the iambic/trochaic patterns of ordinary English speech.[3] Although there are influences between preference rules in music and the phonological principles of the language, which may affect the natural conversation flow, the parallelism is likely to make users sensitive to the music of English. Moreover, it is not uncommon for linguists and musicologists to describe language in musical terms since it corroborates the tentative suggestion that the prosody of a culture (cf. Scotland's folk song collections) is reflected in the rhythm of its music (cf. Larroque 2012, 2021; Lerdhal and Jackendoff 1983; Liberman 1975; Selkirk 1984; Temperley 1999).

These observations form the core of the discussion. The transmission of the speaker's message mainly depends on the prosody of the sentence/utterance which may sound flat and monotonous in, for instance, French speakers' expressivity. In oral exchanges between French and English speakers, accentual mismatches, when said by a French learner, may sound confusing.[4] For example, a difference in meaning may be perceived between *an ˈEnglish ˌteacher* (a teacher of English) and *an ˌEnglish ˈteacher* (a teacher who is English). The signs ˈ and ˌ placed immediately before the appropriate syllables indicate that the syllables have respectively primary and secondary stress, with a pitch movement dependent upon the intonation of the phrase (cf. Jones 1977, introduction xxi-xxii). In sum, suggesting that music can serve as basic rhythmic patterns and intonation may provide balanced phonological structures allowing for work on relevant speech units.

2. The rhythm of English

It is often said that English is a stress-timed language, as opposed to syllable-timed languages like French and other romance tongues where each syllable takes roughly the same amount of time to be pronounced (cf. Carr 2012, p. 107; Pike 1945, pp. 34-36; Schlüter 2005, pp. 24-25). This means that English has a rhythm, that is, a combination of strong and weak beats, in the same way as there is a rhythm in a piece of music or a song.[5] This particular rhythm relies on the stressed syllables in the sentence/utterance (mainly

[3] Iamb: a pattern consisting of one short or unstressed syllable followed by one long or stressed syllable; trochee: a pattern consisting of one long or stressed syllable followed by one short or unstressed syllable.

[4] In French, sentences are stressed on the final syllables.

[5] The beat is the basic rhythmic unit in music.

lexical words: verbs, nouns, adverbs, and adjectives are stressed); the less salient ones (grammatical, including auxiliaries, and link words) are unstressed: they are, as it were, 'squeezed' between the stressed parts of the words and phrases to keep the rhythm.

The rhythm of English rests on what is commonly labeled the Principle of Rhythmic Alternation (cf. Schlüter 2005). This principle, which has the advantage of facilitating language use both for the speaker and the hearer, refers to an idealized structure which alternates stressed and unstressed syllables regularly, as in the sequence illustrated below:

(1) My ˈuncle ˈbought a ˈred and ˈyellow ˈhat

(The superscript diacritic ˈ placed immediately before the beginning of the appropriate syllable represents primary stress.).

A sentence like this is rhythmically well balanced, stressed syllables alternating with unstressed syllables, and complies with the basic rhythm of English. Note that this type of perceptible distribution is not only to be found in poetry or in popular songs, but is also a feature of connected (or ordinary) speech.[6] It may also be noted that such optimal rhythmic combinations are often referred to as eurhythmic (or harmonious). It follows from this that the most eurhythmic construction is a simple stressed-unstressed structure, with only one unstressed syllable following the stressed syllable. This phonological constituent, which appears to be central to the rhythm of English, is the foot (Abercrombie [1976] 1990, p. 131; Carr 2012, pp. 99-100; Giegerich 1985, p. 268; Larroque 2023, pp. 19-20; Schlüter 2005, pp. 20-21). Although the iamb is widely used in English verse, linguists usually hold that the rhythm of English is basically trochaic.

A metrical foot, according to Carr (2012, p.100), for instance, consists of a stressed syllable (primary or secondary stress) followed by any unstressed syllables intervening between it and the next stressed syllable (see also Abercrombie [1976] 1990, p. 131; Giegerich 1985, p. 268; Larroque 2023, p. 19; Schlüter 2005, p. 20). Thus, conforming to the Principle of Rhythmic Alternation the words *uncle* and *yellow* in example (1) contain a simple foot, a stressed syllable (marked) followed by an unstressed syllable. The monosyllabic word *hat* consists only of a stressed syllable. Foot structures with more than one unstressed syllable are therefore less eurhythmic. It may be noted that this preference for eurhythmy is characteristic of English and extends to sequences of metrical feet. For

[6] It must be remembered that English prosody is based on stress. The earliest measures to develop were trochaic soon followed by iambic couplets. These sound patterns were used by dramatists because of their closeness to common speech (cf. Drabble 1985, p. 644; see also Giegerich 1985, p. 268).

instance, example (1) contains two metrical feet, 'bought a' and 'red and' which show that metrical feet do not necessarily map onto single words. Thus, the whole sequence is eurhythmic; both at the level of syllables and at the level of feet (cf. Carr 2012; Roach 2009; Schlüter 2005). A sequence containing *ˈyellow and ˈred ˈhat* would be less eurhythmic, because it exhibits a stress lapse, that is, two adjacent unstressed syllables following a stressed syllable: 'yellow and' and a stress clash, two adjacent stressed syllables: 'red 'hat', and consequently two feet consisting of single words. These constitute violations of the Principle of Rhythmic Alternation. The sequence *ˈred and ˈyellow ˈhat* is more eurhythmic and therefore preferred.

Infractions of the Principle of Rhythmic Alternation will naturally entail compensation strategies. While stress lapses are in many occurrences tolerated, stress clashes are most widely perceived as objectionable. Avoidance of stress clashes between two monosyllabic words is likely to motivate the stressed-unstressed structure. There are indeed compensatory measures to repair these violations of the Principle of Rhythmic Alternation: introducing a pause, elongating the first syllable, or adding an unstressed (grammatical or 'stray') syllable between two clashing syllables (as in *Don't* ***you*** *call me a dude!* or *Still tryin' to get her belt* ***a-loose,*** Chuck Berry in *No Particular Place to Go*) are some of the strategies which may restore eurhythmy. Note that the latter example taken from a rock 'n' roll song illustrates the close relationship which exists between speech and popular music: recall that binary feet are the most favored ones in speech (just as in poetry and songs), followed at a distance by ternary feet (anapest and dactyl).[7] A more interesting compensatory process regarding stress clashes is the manipulation of the placement of stresses known as the stress shift rule. This rule of rhythm reversal applies to polysyllabic words which have final stress when a stressed-stressed sequence occurs, as in *ˌafterˈnoon ˈtea* or *ˌsixˈteen ˈtons* (in a song by the American country and western singer and songwriter Merle Travis[8]). When the word is followed by the stressed syllable of the next foot, the main stress shifts leftward, thus:

(2) a. ˌafterˈnoon ˈtea > ˈafterˌnoon ˈtea
b. ˌsixˈteen ˈtons > ˈsixˌteen ˈtons

In examples (2a-b), the secondary and primary stresses appear to switch around by virtue of the stress shift rule, thus repairing the eurhythmic strong-

[7] Anapest: a pattern consisting of two short or unstressed syllables followed by a long or stressed syllable; dactyl: a pattern consisting of one long or stressed syllable followed by two short or unstressed syllables.

[8] Merle Travis (1917-1983) was an American country and western singer, songwriter and guitarist.

weak structures. In actual fact, the stress shift on *sixteen tons* (cf. 2b) is reflected in Merle Travis' singing, another example of the close relationship between the phonology of the language and its music. Notice, however, that rhythm reversal does not operate on a sequence consisting of an unstressed syllable and the first (therefore stressed) syllable of a foot, as in *alarm clock*. The word *alarm* contains one foot which consists of a stressed syllable and is not followed by a less stressed syllable; that foot comes after a 'stray' unstressed syllable (as shown in the phonetic transcription of the word: /əˈlɑːm/). Although *alarm clock* contains a stressed-stressed sequence of syllables, it does not display a stressed-stressed sequence of feet (as in *afternoon*, for instance, which consists of two feet) and as a consequence does not undergo a stress shift (cf. furthermore Carr 2012, pp. 107-115). In a case like this, the stress clash between *alarm* and *clock* can be repaired by lengthening the stressed syllable of *alarm* or by introducing a short pause between the two clashing syllables.

As mentioned before, stress lapses are more acceptable, though only to a certain extent, than stress clashes. A stress lapse can contain a sequence of two, three, or four unstressed syllables following a stressed one. A very long series of unstressed syllables, however, is likely to disrupt the regularity of the rhythm: the greater the number of unstressed syllables intervening in the interval between two stressed syllables, the faster the tempo, the shorter the syllable length, and the less eurhythmic the utterance. So, as for stress clashes there are compensatory processes. For instance, the avoidance of more than one unstressed syllable can consist in compressing series of unstressed syllables between two stressed ones. Thus in such sequences as *working day*, *working on Sunday*, *working as a waitress*, the unstressed syllables will be shortened in length and 'squeezed' into the interval, so that the sequence will have roughly the same time duration. But an unstressed syllable can also be perceived as a rhythmic beat when it occurs in a stress lapse containing more than two unstressed syllables as in *working as a waitress.* In order to interrupt a series of three unstressed syllables, the addition of a beat on the preposition *as*, typically unstressed, will restore the trochaic rhythm (cf. Attridge 1982, p. 73; Larroque 2021, p. 92; Nespor and Vogel 1989, pp. 76, 85,100; Schlüter 2005, p. 29). In a sequence like *the animals of the Amazon* which displays an interval of four unstressed syllables between two stressed syllables, the naturally unstressed preposition *of* will be perceived as stressed in connected speech, thus interrupting a long series of unstressed syllables. Similar evidence comes in the form of beat addition in blues songs. For example, in many interpretations a typically stressed syllable is added to mark or reinforce a beat.

Compare the following lines taken from Robert Johnson's famous song *Ramblin' on my Mind*:[9]

(3) a. I got ramblin' on my mind
b. I got ramblin' all on my mind

In example (3a) which contains a series of three unstressed syllables following a stressed syllable, the proposition *on*, naturally unstressed, will be perceived as salient to compensate for the stress lapse and repair the trochaic rhythm of the phrase. In (3b), which is the same line repeated, a typically stressed word, here the monosyllabic adverb *all*, is introduced to reinforce the accent. When the line is sung *all* and *on* form a single monosyllabic unit: *all'n*. This type of coalescence entails the deletion of the reduced vowel of the preposition.[10] Compensation for stress lapses will, of course, have an influence on the rhythm and cadence of the sequence, and more generally on the music of the language.

It may be noted, by the way, that both realizations occur in the song and that the use of the adverb *all* as beat addition is a common compensatory process in blues lyrics:

(4) The police run me from Cairo,
All through Arkansas.
The police run me all from Cairo,
All through Arkansas.

Again, in this blues song, *Broken Levee Blues* sung by another renowned blues musician Lonnie Johnson,[11] the typically unstressed prepositions *through* and *from* are reinforced by the stressed (even contrastive) monosyllabic adverb *all.* Note that the first line displays a stress lapse (two adjacent unstressed syllables) between *run* and the first syllable of *Cairo*, which is compensated for in the repeated line. Also consider that in southern African American English the disyllabic word *police* (in the first and third lines) is strongly stressed on the first syllable (cf. Larroque 2021, p. 34),[12] yielding a eurhythmic strong-weak pattern between *police* and *run.*

[9] Robert Johnson (1911-1938) was an American blues musician and songwriter.
[10] In English, unaccented vowels are naturally reduced.
[11] Lonnie Johnson (1899-1970) was an American blues and jazz singer, guitarist, and songwriter.
[12] In southern African American English many disyllabic words which would be stressed on the final syllable in other English varieties, such as *police, behind, Detroit, display,* etc., are stressed on the first syllable,

In general, blues songs have a recitative form, in the sense that they use the rhythm and intonation of spoken English. These features are somewhat reflected in the music.

3. Music and language

Music functions on two axes: the axis of simultaneity and the axis of sequences. This is comparable with the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes of language. However, the syntagmatic axis of music tends to contradict the paradigmatic axis of language which is concerned with selection and excludes intrasegmental simultaneity, which means that two sounds cannot be produced at the same moment (Beneveniste 1974, p. 56). Neither does the axis of sequences correspond exactly to the syntagmatic axis of language since the musical sequence is compatible with the simultaneity of sounds. Therefore, music can be regarded as a language which has syntax but no semiotics, because it comprises no semantics. This contrast reveals that the prosodic features, that is, features which appear when sounds are put together in both connected speech and melody, are to be emphasized when studying music and language, especially when the linguistic rhythm occurs at the level of the melody, which represents the axis of sequences.

For instance, as Patel (2007, p. 165) notes, "there may be a direct route from language to music" based on the idea that prosodic patterns are acquired in a very early age. It has, indeed, been established that young children are arguably very sensitive to the music of their native language (cf. Nazzi *et al*. 1998; Ramus 2002). They incorporate statistically, consciously or subconsciously, the prosodic patterns of their mother tongue. This is called 'statistical learning'. It may be worth remembering, at this point, that every language has a melody and, that users have long claimed that languages have their own music – which, of course, implies that it is mainly the prosody of the language that constitutes the character of its music (cf. Rousseau [1753] 1993, pp. 145-146; see also Giles and Niedzielski 1998, pp. 85-93).

Adults as well can be sensitive to the music of a language and acquire its intonation and rhythm, especially when they learn a new idiom. The example of African slaves brought to North America is quite significant: they relied on their native languages while copying the prosody and syntax of English, the only concrete element that they could decipher (cf. Jones 1963, pp. 21-22; Larroque 2018a, p. 21). In fact, what is commonly called today 'southern accent', or 'jive talk', for instance, used to be "the accent of a foreigner trying to speak a new and unfamiliar language" (Jones 1963, p. 22), and early African American speech was words learned from slave owners, pronounced as best as possible and arranged into "aboriginal speech patterns" (Herskovits 1941, p. 80), whence Larroque's (2012, p. 123; 2021, pp. 1-4)

initial hypothesis that early blues singers may have been influenced by the trochaic rhythm of English in their music.

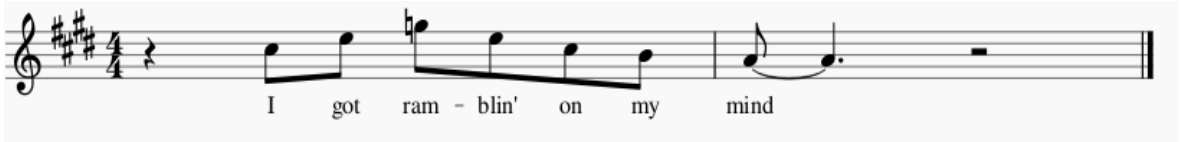
But music is also a system in which the signs represent something analogous to language. Like language, it is made of sounds, the musical status of which is characterized by notes on a stave. These musical units may not be directly comparable with linguistic signs. They are organized into scales, that is, sets of musical notes ordered by increasing or decreasing pitch. Musical sounds, moreover, may be produced in single melodic lines or simultaneously, as in chords for example. There is no limitation to the multiplicity and combination of sounds. The composer or song writer is free to organize the sounds in an unconventional grammatical discourse which is only submitted to its own syntax.

As mentioned above, music cannot convey objective meaning, although within a context music can evoke emotions, for example, jazz improvisations can be regarded as conversations: one musician starts a phrase and lets the others complete it, and a kind of dialog takes place, thus creating a musical story and communicating emotions. Jones (1963, p. 30), for instance, argues that a jazz saxophonist like Charlie Parker[13] was able to produce sounds that would "imitate the human voice with his cries, swoops, squawks, and slurs".

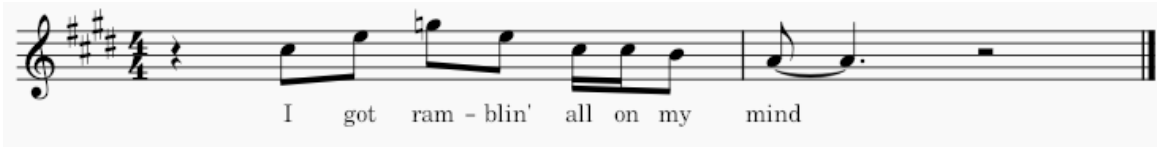
Language, conversely, can be objective. Yet, the music of the language can be perceived in poetry which incorporates musical processes such as rhythm or harmony. Songs, for example, are, as it were, the manifestation of poetic texts set to music, and the rhythmic patterns of the language tend to map onto those or the music. In other words, the rhythm and intonation of the language are reflected in the music. The musical transcription of the linguistic variation exemplified above in (3a-b), repeated as (5a-b), can serve as an illustration of this:

(5)

a.



b.



[13] Charlie Parker (1920-1955) was an American jazz saxophonist, bandleader, and composer.

In example (5), the eighth note (quaver) which is aligned with the preposition *on* (cf. 5a) is subdivided into sixteenth notes (semi quavers, cf. 5b, ♫♩ = *all on my*) to make way for the stressed monosyllabic adverb *all* (the onset of the beamed sixteenth and eighth notes has greater force than the other note figures of the group). Thus, as stated previously, the set of three unstressed syllables is broken by the addition of a default stressed syllable. It may be noted, moreover, that the intonation of the musical phrase, which constitutes a foot group,[14] follows a speech-like declarative falling tone.

At this point, the notion of metrical division deserves some comment. In the same way as language can be divided into regular periods, a piece of music may display equal metrical time divisions (as illustrated in 5a-b) which constitute a sensible basis for rhythm. Take the phrases *a red hat, a yellow hat,* and *a different hat.* When you beat time to the rhythm of the stressed syllables (by clapping your hands or tapping your foot; you may also use a metronome), you will realize that they occur at regular intervals in all three sequences. The stress pattern is as follows (the vertical lines indicate the limits of the time periods, and the stressed syllables are marked by placing the sign ˈ immediately before the appropriate syllable):

(6) a | ˈred ˈhat |
a | ˈyellow ˈhat |
a | ˈdifferent ˈhat |

Such constructions are equal in duration. As a consequence, the unstressed syllables are compressed to fit in the interval. The resulting pattern is a two-beat unit in which the beat maps onto the stressed syllables.

In musical notation, the beat will be represented by a quarter note (crotchet) value (i.e. ♩).[15] We can think of a beat as the stroke of a pendulum as it swings from side to side. No matter how fast or slow the motion, it will always be even. Example (7) shows that linguistic rhythm and musical rhythm are aligned:

[14] A foot group, or tone group, is the minimum unit of speech which carries intonation. It usually ends with a tonic syllable (tonic placement).
[15] In a 4/4 measure bar, for example, in which a quarter note receives one count.

(7) a | ˈred ˈhat |

a | ˈyellow ˈhat |

a | ˈdifferent ˈhat |

(It is important to note that the two eighth notes (♫) and the eighth note triplet () take up the same amount of time as a quarter note; also exemplified in (8) below)

Example (7) clearly demonstrates that the phonology of the language can be translated into music, when dealing with rhythm and intonation (cf. also 5a-b). Indeed, the fact that there are stressed syllables alternating with unstressed syllables may produce pitch variation, either higher or lower, as stressed syllables are naturally elongated relative to unstressed ones (cf. Pierrehumbert 2003). Similarly, sentences containing more than two metrical feet as in example (1) fall into four-beat units depending on the number of feet, as shown in (8):

(8) my | ˈuncle ˈbought a ˈred and ˈyellow | ˈhat

The beamed eighth notes represent the trochaic metrical feet. Each time is divided into two parts, two eighth notes, the first part of which having greater force than the other. As may be expected, foot structures do not match with beat units (cf. the quarter note figures below them) and divisions into metrical feet are irrespective of word boundaries, another similarity between language and music.

The following example is, moreover, an illustration of the influence of feet on the rhythm of a sentence:

(9) I'll | see you again tomorrow |(night)

This sentence falls into a three beat units or triple meter (the waltz type) with, starting from the first stressed syllable, three metrical feet 'see you a', 'gain to', and 'morrow'. If *night* is added after *tomorrow* it will constitute the first beat of the next measure bar. Additionally, in order to keep a steady beat, the pronunciation of the binary feet (containing two syllables) will be influenced by that of the first metrical foot which displays three syllables and will

imprint a ternary rhythm to the sequence. This can be obtained by elongating the first eighth note of the beamed pair (which is more stressed and naturally lengthened) into a triplet feel ( or ). It represents the triplet feel of blues or rock 'n' roll music. In actual fact, many song lyrics in English display this type of trochaic rhythm.

Consider, for instance, the sequence illustrated below, taken from Michael Jackson's song *Gone Too Soon*:

(10) Like a comet blazing (a)cross the ev'ning sky.
a | ˈcomet | ˈblazing | ˈcross the | ˈev'ning | ˈsky

The division of the line into metrical feet shows that it corresponds to the trochaic binary rhythm in English. Each stressed syllable is followed by an unstressed syllable to form a eurhythmic stressed-unstressed series, except for the final monosyllabic foot. There are, indeed, five metrical feet in this line: 'comet', 'blazing', 'cross the', 'ev'ning', and 'sky'. This division shows that metrical structure is not sensitive to word boundaries and that the 'stray' unstressed syllable of *across* can be deleted, thus avoiding a stress lapse. This type of metrical division occurs in many pop song lyrics. One famous and much cited example (cf. Larroque 2012, p. 134; 2021, p. 116; 2023, p. 20) can be found in Pink Floyd's song *Another Brick in the Wall* (*The Wall* 1979): "All in all, you're just a… nother brick in the wall". In this line, the interesting metrical feet are 'just a' and 'nother'. The pause in the singing intervenes between the two feet and the unstressed syllable of the foot 'just a' is, as it were, perceptually suspended, thus illustrating the music of the language.

Similarly, double negatives, which may address an influence of the trochaic rhythm on English grammar, have a rhythmic function both in language and in music. They may help to compensate for violations of the Rhythmic Alternation Principle. Consider, for instance, the sequence *we don't need no education* taken from the same aforementioned song. Although most people, including teachers, argue against such so-called illogical grammatical form,[16] it sounds more balanced with its double negative construction than *we don't need education*, which exhibits a stress clash between *need* and the first stressed syllable (secondary stress) of *education*,

[16] According to prescriptive grammar, double negatives defy logic. It claims that two negatives in a sentence cancel each other out and yield a positive. Yet, most English speakers have no difficulty interpreting this grammatical form negatively, because the basic principle that there is a direct and simple relationship between the surface syntactic structure and the logical form is spurious. In fact, the two negatives do not operate on the same stages of the predication, that is, the attitudinal and the predicative levels. While the former concerns the speaker's involvement in his or her speech and the latter the informational content, they cannot therefore collide. Besides, the duplication of marks in a sentence has an intensifying meaning (cf. Larroque 2018b).

or *we don't need any education*, which displays a stress clash between *need* and the first (stressed) syllable of *any*. The monosyllabic negative determiner *no* intervening between *need* and the first stressed syllable of *education* avoids a stress clash and is much easier to place than *any* rhythmically. Furthermore, it yields an eight-syllable line which allows a pause after *no,* marking the rhythmic point of division of the second metrical foot (*caesura*), 'need no' in the line. The same kind of analysis can be carried out with the line *I can't get no satisfaction* famously sung by Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones. In this case, besides permitting a break after the first part of the line, the double negative intensifies the discursive negation by stressing the suspended negative *no*, thus making the chorus more effective. It is interesting to note, in passing, that the possible stress clash between the negated auxiliaries *don't* and *can't* is compensated for since the reduced negative element *n't* borrows length from the stressed auxiliary so that *don't* and *can't* can be perceived as trochaic and exhibit a ternary syncopated feel.

When the duration of the stressed objects is lengthened, it creates breaks in the rhythm. These changes are called syncopations.[17] The syncopation phenomenon in the musical phrase displaces the strong beats over to the next weak beats of the measure bar. At the level of the time unit, it deletes note values. Both levels combined permits compensating for a number of infractions of the Rhythmic Alternation Principle. Syncopation, or syncope, in phonology means the loss of a sound, of a letter or a vowel, in the interior of a word, for example: *never > ne'er, over > o'er, heaven > heav'n, listen > lis'n, across > 'cross, because > 'cause* or simply *cos*, etc. Such forms as *ain't, don't, can't, won't, mustn't,* and periphrastic constructions as *gonna,* (for *going to*), *gotta* (for *has/have got to*), *dunno* (for *don't know*), *twern't* (for *(if) it were not*),[18] which are commonly called contractions are syncopes, some of which are, as mentioned above, likely to influence the rhythm of an utterance, and help to compensate for stress lapses. They are widely used in popular music. In the phrase *I believe you gonna lose your mind* (Tommy McClennan, *Whiskey-Headed Woman*)[19] which displays a regular eurhythmic stressed-unstressed sequence, the form *gonna* avoids the possible stress lapse generated by *going to.* Also note the absence of the unstressed auxiliary (*are* is reduced to *'re* and deleted).

There is therefore evidence that the linguistic rhythm can leave an imprint on the musical rhythm which occurs at the level of the melody, that is, at the level shared by both linguistic and musical domains. Indeed,

[17] The word syncopation derives from the Greek "*sygkoptô*", meaning *break, disruption*.

[18] This structure is taken from W. C. Handy's *Saint-Louis Blues*, and is characteristic of syllable reduction: only *were* is stressed because it carries the negation.

[19] Tommy McClennan (1905-1961) was one of America's most successful blues singers.

melodic rhythms tend to reflect the cadence of the verses of a song and plausibly influence it.

4. Language and melody

In this section, further suprasegmental considerations will be taken into account; they provide extra data about stress and intonation, and their effect on the way words, phrases, and sentences/utterances are articulated, rise and fall when one speaks. As discussed earlier, syllables are not pronounced with equal force. In English, stressed syllables contrast with unstressed ones. The difference is that unstressed syllables are less salient and generally occur in reduced forms, while stressed syllables are more prominent and occur in their full form. Compare, for instance, the sounds corresponding to the realization of the letter <o> in the word *photograph.* In this word, the first syllable is stressed and contains a full vowel, the second syllable is, conversely, unstressed and contains a reduced vowel. Thus, <o> in the first (stressed) syllable will be pronounced as /əʊ/, reduced to /ə/, which is typically short and occurs in unstressed syllables. Also, the consonant /t/ in unstressed position is likely to be reduced to a flap.[20]

Musically, the syllables, as mentioned before, are pronounced on different notes (different pitches in the scale of utterable sounds for a given performer).

The sequence of notes constitutes melodies which can be limited to two types in accordance with what is perceived at the end of the sentence: a rising melody or a falling melody. In the line taken from Ed Sheeran's song *Photograph* illustrated below, only the lexical words (*keep, love, photograph*) are stressed and alternate with function words (*we, this, in*) which typically occur in unstressed positions.

(11) We keep this love in a photograph.

Generally, the music follows this sound pattern. Listening to the song offers great help when analyzing a sentence in terms of syllables, word stress, rhythm, and intonation while practicing.

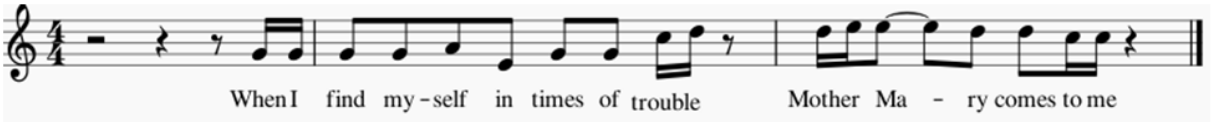
[20] This voiced alveolar consonantal sound (also known as a 'tap'), transcribed phonetically as /ɾ/, is produced when the blade of the tongue momentarily touches the roof of the mouth. A good example of the flap in English can be found in the way the word *better* is pronounced by Paul McCartney of the Beatles in the song *Hey Jude*. This is also the sound that most American speakers make instead of /t/ and /d/ in words like *battery, letter, ladder, bedding,* etc. (cf. Carr 2012, pp. 13, 105-106).

In a statement, for instance, in which the relation can be true or false, the intonation/melody is uttered with a falling pitch. Take the first lines of the song *Let It Be*, by the Beatles, which displays eurhythmic alternations:

(12) a. When I |ˈfind my|ˈself in |ˈtimes of |ˈtrouble,
b. |ˈMother |ˈMary |ˈcomes to |ˈme.
c. |ˈWhisper |ˈwords of |ˈwisdom, |ˈlet it |ˈbe.

These lyrics have been divided into metrical trochaic feet, starting from the first stressed syllable, as indicated by the vertical lines separating the feet. They contain tone groups, the last syllable of which being perceptually more salient than the others (tonic placement), and this will be illustrated in the music, as shown in the transcription of the first two stretches, (12a-b), below:

(13)



In this example, the music follows the trochaic rhythm of the language: downbeats or the first part of beats correspond to stressed syllables, and two tone groups can be distinguished, as they are separated by a pause (i.e. the eighth note rest: 𝄾). The music shows that the first tone unit carries a rising pitch, conveying no impression of finality, but opening on a continuation, the 'answer', as it were, to an indirect question which is uttered with a falling pitch in the second tone group. A similar analysis can be conducted with the third line (example 12c), the first tone group of which, *Whisper words of wisdom*,[21] being uttered with a rising pitch, and the last of which, *let it be*, being voiced with a falling tone. Furthermore, it may be noted that the tone groups in (13) correspond to the major syntactic constituents of the utterance, namely the two clauses in question. Also, as illustrated in the music (cf. example 13), the first two unstressed syllables introducing the song are transcribed as pickup notes (*anacrusis*) which precede the first strong downbeat, thus marking the beginning of the foot count. The music in this case follows the patterns of the language, that is, the rhythm, the intonation, and the English syntax.

In a complete question, namely a yes-no question, in which the validation of the subject-predicate relation is suspended, the intonation is rising (cf. Huart 2010, pp. 54-55). For example, in Elvis Presley's song *Are*

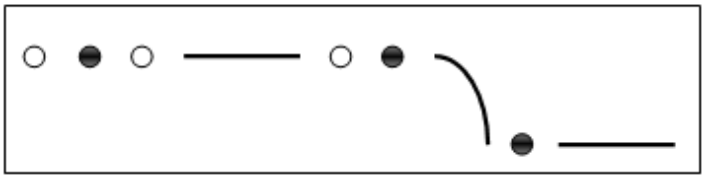
[21] Note in passing the alliteration with /w/, which is another sound effect of the language.

You Lonesome Tonight?, there is a typically rising pitch in the singing. Conversely, in a statement such as the one exemplified in (14),

(14) What do you get when you fall in love? (Burt Bacharach, *I'll Never Fall in Love*)

in which the sequence *fall in love* is asserted, that is, in which the subject-predicate nexus [you – fall in love] is given, the pitch contour is a fall. The question applies to the object of 'getting'. Again, this feature can be perceived in the way the sentence is sung. A scalar representation in (15) may illustrate the pitch contour of this line:

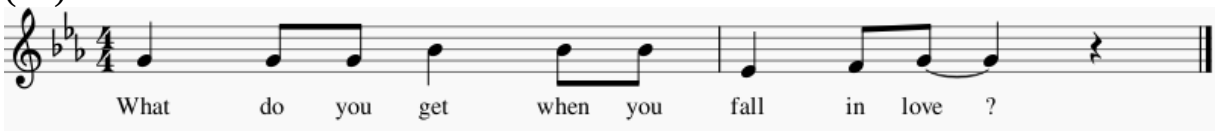
(15)



What do you get when you fall in love?

The music more or less follows the sound patterns with a drop on the word *fall*, as shown in example (16) below:

(16)



In this instance, the nucleus (tonic syllable) is *love* which carries a low rising tone and conveys a sense of mutual agreement as well as a desire to add something. The high pitch on *get* corresponds to the 'head', the part extending from the first stressed syllable to the tonic syllable (cf. Roach 2009). In addition, it may be noted in the musical transcription that the lexical words, *get, fall* and *love*, and the quarter notes (which correspond to strong beats) [22] are aligned and constitute the rhythmic backbone of the phrase, both musically and linguistically. Also notice that the slur (the tied notes) in the second measure bar ends on a strong beat (cf. the quarter note on the third beat).

The description outlined above is certainly a limited one, but it nevertheless provides sufficient evidence to make significant observations

[22] In a 4/4 measure bar, the first and the third beats are strong beats with predominance given to the first beat of the measure; the second and fourth beats are weak.

and trigger further investigations building upon the close relationship there is between music and language. What is important here is the fact that the prosody of the language can be reflected in its music, and maps onto its inflections. Moreover, the linguistic and musical syntaxes, as can be seen in the musical transcription of excerpt (14), display features which are shared by both areas: for instance, the melodic rhythm closely reflects the cadence of the verse. Equally, the analyzed data tend to demonstrate that the linguistic rhythm and intonation interact, as it were, with the musical rhythm, and this mainly concerns the melody, which is the defined stage shared by the two systems and the locus where the influence of one upon the other can actually operate.

5. Language is music

Beyond rhythm and intonation, prosody also involves many auditory properties of speech such as loudness, duration, pitch, and pauses. Prosodic features are mainly suprasegmental and are carried by every segment in the utterance. Modulating word stress and syllable structure has indeed the effect of influencing the rhythm of the language, and this can be perceived in its music. But in the end, all the auditory aspects of speech put together, notably compensation strategies, contribute to maintaining as much as possible its trochaic stressed-unstressed foot structure.

It can hardly escape notice, therefore, that there are similarities between language and music. All languages have their own music. In both systems there is a sense that rhythmic segmentation, or grouping, is divided into phrases of equal duration and organized in a periodical succession to create a base rhythm. This can be seen in example (16), in which the musical representation of function words, for instance, are grouped into beamed eighth notes, leaving perceptual salience to lexical words.

Rhythm is the main component of both language and music. It operates on similar systemic principles. This is one of the reasons why it is often said that language is music (cf. for example, Saraysky 2009), and introducing musical elements, such as speech rhythm, intonation, tone, and tempo, in the description of language may be of use when carrying out the study of linguistic (notably phonological) phenomena, as it is naturally related to speech.

According to this view, the present survey has been an attempt to demonstrate how the rhythmic features of English phonology are reflected in lyrics and in music, and thereby broaden our understanding of the correlation there is between the words of a song, its music, and the rhythm of English. What is more, the predominantly monosyllabic words in English make it an easy medium to align words and music, and enforce the trochaic (either

binary or ternary) patterns of the language. More thorough analyses may highlight other significant features apt to mutually clarify both systems, and the workings of the human mind as to the transmission of information. From the aforementioned observations, it may be worth delving more deeply into the description of rhythm and intonation in that special relationship between language and music, and it may be interesting to extend the study to other music forms and songs. This question is likely to be explored further.

Urban rap, which began in the 1970's, for example, sounds like a recitative rhyme scheme in which the rhythm of the language has great importance. It is as if the rhythm of American English gives the singing its tempo. Since rap music is essentially based on rhythm rather than melody, the flow of syllables in utterances enables the singers to put necessary energy into words and speech production when they rap. This music genre is liable to demonstrate that music and language share a fair amount of aspects which are firmly rooted in speech.

6. To conclude

What has been sketched herein is not intended to add to the oral grammar of English (cf. Huart 2010) by treating the phonology of the language completely, using musical forms, but rather, it focused on a number of sound and linguistic aspects such as pitch, duration, word length, and to a lesser extent loudness, in the perception of stress and intonation, thereby suggesting that these features can be connected to language use with a view to show how this relates to music.

It is not an easy task, because music and language tend to mutually influence each other, and it is sometimes difficult to decide which one serves as a reference to the other. It may, indeed, be contended that in some instances the music takes the lead owing to musical constraints,[23] but it seems plausible that speech prosody influences musical structure (cf. Patel 2007, pp. 224-225), notably at the level of the melody, that is, at the level shared by the two systems. In song lyrics, for instance, words and music are independent components, and syllables should be aligned in time, which means that stressed syllables must, as best as possible, match with strong positions, and avoid lapses and syllable compression (cf. for example, Hayes 2005).

Finally, this type of work on linguistic (mainly phonological and lexical) phenomena may contribute to providing foreign learners of English with a fun and familiar model, a musical and rhythmic reference on which

[23] Such as meter, rhythm, and tempo (speed).

they can rely and base their speech, and stress the words and phrases in order to produce more ‘swinging’ and expressive utterances.

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"YOU GIVE LOVE A BAD NAME" Using Popular Song Titles to Teach Direct and Indirect Objects in English

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Abstract – The use of elements of popular culture for L2 language instruction has long been a topic of interest for instructors of English. This pilot study examines the use of popular song titles to help teach L2 students to distinguish between indirect and direct objects in English. Titles are used instead of lyrics because they cannot be copyrighted. A pre-test and post-test methodology was utilized. Each test contained four popular song titles and four generic sentences, all of which contained both indirect and direct objects in English. Three international students whose native languages were not English and who were enrolled at an undergraduate college in the US were asked to identify the indirect and direct objects in the texts. A total of 24 aggregate responses were generated for each test. None of the students (0/24, 0%) were able to distinguish indirect objects from direct objects in the pre-test. After a teaching intervention, the results improved to 19/24. Students performed better on the popular song titles (11/12) than on the generic sentences (8/12). The results suggest that popular song titles can be used effectively in English language learning.

Keywords: English language; pedagogy; indirect objects; direct objects; popular music.

1. Introduction

L2 instructors have long been intrigued by the potential of using language from popular culture to help students learn a target language. The hypothesis under consideration is that students will be more invested and eager to learn if the instruction makes use of language that is important to them and that they use often in their everyday lives (Toffoli and Sockett 2014). Along with texts from film, television, and literature, lyrics from popular music have been integrated in L2 classes. Recent research has focused on the potential of popular music lyrics to connect formal L2 learning in class with informal L2 learning outside of the academic environment, the motivational potential of L2 learning with the use of popular music lyrics, the integration of popular music lyrics with many of the types of technology on which students place a high value, and the use of popular music lyrics to help teach and learn vocabulary, listening skills, and pronunciation (Akbary *et al*. 2018; Ludke

and Morgan 2022; Werner 2019). Additionally, research by Hua and Li (2015) and by Ludke (2018) demonstrates that the use of popular music lyrics can have a positive impact on L2 students' understanding of grammar in the target language.

1.1. Literature Review

Recent work on the effectiveness of using music in second-language learning reinforces cautious optimism about the pedagogical potential of music in the L2 classroom (Degrave 2019; Sun *et al*. 2024). Lee and Schreibeis (2021) report that "it is possible to argue that music has great potential as a valuable subject for cognitive, emotional, and language development. Music can be used to teach unfamiliar vocabulary, pronunciation, or prosody in both first and second language" (241). Lee and Schreibeis build on earlier work such as that by Lems (2005), who used song titles and lyrics successfully with an adult English-language-learning class and concluded that "There are few texts better than song lyrics for capturing a student's interest. The enormous popularity of lyrics Web sites is testament to this" (19). Fernández de Cañete García *et al.* (2022) compared music-based English-language instruction with instruction based on gamification and found that music worked better. These researchers also considered the variable of past musical training (instrumental, not vocal) and determined that it did not have an impact on students' success with learning English with song titles and lyrics.

The use of song titles and lyrics is, at first glance, a pedagogical strategy to provide students with a sense of ownership in the target language: in this case, students are likely to be familiar with, and perhaps even devoted to, a number of popular songs in English given that language's role as a worldwide *lingua franca* (Jenkins 2017). The idea is that students will be more motivated to learn the target language if they see texts in that language that are important to them. Students are also more likely to retain the knowledge if texts that are potentially meaningful to them, such as popular song titles and lyrics, are used (Medina 2002). Students have been found to be less anxious about learning a second language when music is incorporated into a class (Chou 2012; Dolean 2016). Beyond these advantages of motivation, improved memory, and less stress, though, music has been found to be associated with additional cognitive benefits such as a temporary boost in spatial reasoning ability—the so-called Mozart effect of popular acclaim (Rauscher *et al*. 1998). Lee (2014) has demonstrated the advantages of allowing students to help choose the music used in L2 learning, as the students would be more motivated to pay close attention in class and even perhaps listen to the music outside of class. Lorenzutti (2014) developed a technique called "double gap fill" in which the instructor guides students in a discussion of the topic of a popular English-language song in an effort to

generate vocabulary and phrasing related to the topic before the audio of the song is played. The students are thus better prepared to listen to a song and correctly place a missing word into the song's lyrics that the instructor is showing in written form.

A caveat is in order: it is important to note that the emphasis for L2 learning is on the song titles and lyrics as texts and not on musical components such as notes, chords, rhythms, instrumentation, time signature, key signature, tempo, dynamics, vocal technique, and the like. Although as mentioned above many students do seem to enjoy classrooms that feature music, it is not wholly necessary that students actually listen to the music that the song titles and lyrics derive from (Bennett 2019). It is generally enough that the song titles and lyrics are familiar to and valued by the students. Nevertheless, Lee and Schreibeis (2012) found that students learned synforms such as "sensitive" and "sensible" more effectively if they are a part of an ascending seven-step melody in a major key versus learning the synforms as part of a three-step melody in the same key and without melody at all. Other researchers have found song titles and lyrics useful in the sense that features such as pitch, rhythm, prosody, and duration contained in the titles and lyrics are also important parts of spoken text. Thus, the song titles and lyrics can help with learning these features (Chobert and Besson 2013; Heffner and Slevec 2015; Patel 2008). Overall, then, it is as yet unclear to what extent, if any, the musical components of the songs the titles and lyrics are taken from impact the L2 learning.

It is also important to acknowledge that not all students will know the specific song titles and lyrics used by an L2 instructor even when the titles and lyrics come from the realm of popular music. An enormous spectrum of genres and styles comprises popular music. These genres and styles date from the present all the way back to the 1950s, when rock-'n'-roll got its start, growing out of earlier musical styles such as the blues and gospel, among others. Certainly popular music existed before this time period: 1920s jazz, 19th-century folk music, and 16th- and 17th-century madrigals in Italy and England are examples of genres and styles that had widespread appeal. But the rapid expansion of radio and television and the ability to purchase inexpensive recordings, in the form of vinyl at first but eventually many other formats and media as well, enabled popular music to reach audiences worldwide for the first time. Music streaming and its system of enabling students to become music users rather than music collectors has accelerated this trend of increasing access to popular music, as has the decreasing cost of purchasing popular music (Brennan and Devine 2020). Another important consideration is the sheer volume of popular music that is now being created and released: in 2024, more music was released on any single day than in the entire year of 1989 (Price 2024). English-language music has attracted a great deal of interest as the use of English as a *de facto* world language has

evolved, and it has become an informal but valuable method of L2 learning. Perhaps sensing an opportunity, a British musician, teacher, and entrepreneur launched a company called Languages Through Music in 2024. This company's website lists 12 languages that customers are able to learn (the website claims) with the help of music containing lyrics in the target language. Overall, then, the use of song titles and lyrics as an L2 learning tool has started to gain a great deal of attention. Thus, while not every student will know every song title or lyric used by an instructor, there is a reasonable chance that a number of students will be familiar with it. If a title or lyric from an international hit (Hunter-Tilney 2017) such as Bon Jovi's "You Give Love a Bad Name"[1] is used, the chances are even greater.

Indirect objects are something of an enigma for many students. They are not common in English. Often, a semantically equivalent expression that uses a prepositional phrase is used instead. For example, "You give love a bad name" is a sentence that contains an indirect object, "love," but this utterance would frequently be written or voiced in English as "You give a bad name to love." In this latter sentence, the indirect object drops out, and "love" is an object of the preposition "to." Nonetheless, indirect objects do appear from time to time. Verbs that are used with indirect objects are called ditransitive verbs because they can have both direct and indirect objects. Indeed, an indirect object cannot be present unless there is also a direct object in the sentence. The opposite case is different, though: direct objects do not need to be accompanied by an indirect object, and in fact, most of them are not.

As with any structural and/or functional part of speech, indirect objects can be characterized in a number of different ways and from a number of different grammatical perspectives (Reichl 1990). Herriman and SeppAnen (1996) lament that indirect objects suffer from a "bewildering variety of interpretations... derived from the grammarians' practice of extending the scope of the indirect object by subsuming different types of further structures under the concept" (484). Despite the unmistakable complexity, a simple, relatively straightforward clausal structure that contains an indirect object can be useful for English-language pedagogy.

[1] "You Give Love a Bad Name" is the lead single on Bon Jovi's third album *Slippery When Wet*, released in 1986. It was Bon Jovi's first number one hit on the US Billboard Hot 100. The song returned to the charts in 2007 when it was performed by a contestant on the American television program *American Idol*. In 2009, the American cable television network VH1 included "You Give Love a Bad Name" in their list of the Greatest Hard Rock Songs of All Time. With the 2024 release of the Bon Jovi docuseries *Thank You, Goodnight: The Bon Jovi Story* on the streaming service Hulu, the song once again surged in popularity, nearly 40 years after its initial release (McIntyre 2024).

1.2. Research Question

The current study examines the use of popular song titles to teach L2 English students the differences between direct and indirect objects. In doing so, this study answers a call from Zeromskaite (2014) to move research on the use of popular song titles and lyrics from English phonology instruction to other topics such as structure and semantics. Direct and indirect objects are easily confused (Halim 2023), even by many native speakers of English, but the use of popular song titles may help students distinguish between the two types of objects more readily.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Paradigm

The primary investigator researched popular English-language music that had been released between 1960 and 2023 with the purpose of identifying song titles that were grammatically complete sentences and that contained both direct objects and indirect objects. The 1960 to 2023 time period was chosen because it represents an era when popular music became increasingly globally accessible. Titles were prioritized instead of lyrics more generally because titles cannot be copyrighted in many countries and are thus easier to use without risk of running afoul of intellectual property laws. Titles also have the advantage of generally being short and thus easier to analyze. The song titles used for this study ranged between four and seven words. This research was part of a larger project that resulted in the publication of a book on the use of popular song titles to help teach English grammar and style. This project required the use of titles rather than lyrics because of the copyright implications. The current research was undertaken as a pilot study in an effort to empirically test the approach of using popular song titles as a method of grammar instruction.

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained for the study. A list of currently enrolled international students (*i.e.*, those holding a current United States student visa) at the institution where the primary investigator works was obtained from the Assistant Director for International Student Life. This list indicated each student's first language. The target population for this study was students whose first language was not English. Of the 28 international students listed, 22 had first languages other than English. An email invitation was sent to these 22 students to participate in the study. After a reminder sent a week later, five students volunteered to take part in the study. A Doodle poll was sent to these students to find a day and time that would work for everyone. A mutually agreeable day and time could not be

established for all five students, but four of the students indicated that they were able to attend the research session that was eventually scheduled. An email reminder was sent the day before the research session, and three students attended. The students were incentivized with pizza and beverages. The study was not a part of any course and did not have an impact on any student grades.

All of the students were undergraduates enrolled full-time at a small, comprehensive college in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The students' first languages were Spanish, Cebuano, and Pangasinense. Both of the latter languages are regional languages in the Philippines.

2.2. Instruments of Analysis

A pre- and post-test methodology was employed for the study. The primary investigator welcomed the students and thanked them for their participation. No initial information about direct or indirect objects, or grammar more generally, was provided before the pre-test. Both the pre-test and the post-test were identical in format: each consisted of eight sentences that contained direct objects and indirect objects. The first four sentences on each test were titles of well-known popular songs. The name of the singer or band that performed each song, along with the year of its release, was listed after the title. The remaining four sentences on each test were generic and had no known connection with popular music. These generic sentences were of a similar length to the song title sentences, ranging from four to eight words.

The primary investigator distributed the pre-test, which was on paper, to the students. At the top of the pre-test was an Informed Consent statement that the primary investigator asked the students to sign. The students complied and then proceeded to complete the pre-test, which asked the students to identify the direct object ("DO") and indirect object ("IO") in each sentence. Upon completion, the students turned in their pre-tests to the primary investigator. The pre-test is shown below:

> In each of the following sentences, circle the direct object, labeling it as "DO," and the indirect object, labeling it as "IO."
>
> 1. You give love a bad name. (Bon Jovi, 1986)
> 2. I give you power. (Arcade Fire featuring Mavis Staples, 2017)
> 3. [You] sing me Spanish techno. (New Pornographers, 2005)
> 4. You don't bring me flowers. (Barbra Streisand and Neil Diamond, 1978)
> 5. The professor taught the students a new theory.
> 6. [You] text them the address.
> 7. Casey bought Skyler some ramen.

8. The insurance company sent Devon a bill.

The two titles that contain "[You]" indicate that the title was originally written in imperative mood. As such, in English, the word "You" is not actually in the title; instead, the subject of an imperative mood sentence is called "'You' understood" by linguists. The primary investigator included "[You]" to provide students with more typical grammatically complete sentences in which the direct and indirect objects might be more readily recognized.

The primary investigator next initiated the teaching intervention and explained the differences between direct and indirect objects. The first song title, "You give love a bad name," was used as a representative example. The primary investigator wrote this song title on a white board that the students were able to see clearly. The primary investigator used the white board for other notes as needed. The information conveyed to the students was as follows:

1. Both direct object and indirect objects are nouns.
2. Indirect objects are not common in English, unlike direct objects.
3. More common in English are sentences that contain the same information as a sentence with an indirect object but instead use a prepositional phrase, as with "You give a bad name to love."
4. In English, sentences with indirect objects are generally shorter than their semantically equivalent counterparts with a prepositional phrase because the preposition is dropped.
5. Direct objects receive the action of the verb, while indirect objects signify to whom or what, or for whom or what, an action is performed.
6. Indirect objects are typically used with a limited group of action verbs that include give, provide, send, make, bring, show, tell, ask, teach, loan, ask, and write.
7. Simple sentences that have both direct and indirect objects generally have three nouns that are in the following sequence: subject, indirect object, direct object.

The primary investigator wrote a number of the other song titles from the pre-test on the white board to clarify some of the above points.

Following the teaching intervention, students asked a few questions for clarification, which the primary investigator answered. The primary investigator then reviewed a number of the above points from the teaching intervention, emphasizing the common grammatical sequence of subject, indirect object, and direct object, and distributed the post-test. The post-test is shown below:

In each of the following sentences, circle the direct object, labeling it as "DO," and the indirect object, labeling it as "IO."

1.1. She brings me love. (Bad Company, 1979)
2. Burning airlines give you so much more. (Brian Eno, 1974)
3. [You] just give me a reason. (Pink featuring Nate Ruess, 2014)
4. [You] cry me a river. (Justin Timberlake, 2002)
5. Jordan read the kids a story.
6. The professor wrote the students an email.
7. Dakota loaned Blair $50.
8. Cameron handed me the wrench.

As with the pre-test, the two titles that contain "[You]" indicate that the title was originally written in imperative mood.

After the students completed their post-test, they handed it in to the primary instructor. The primary instructor thanked the students for their participation in the study.

3. Results

Results will first be reported in aggregate form for both the pre-test and post-test. Three students who answered eight questions each yields a total of 24 responses for each test.

Results for the pre-test were 0/24. None of the students was able to distinguish direct objects from indirect objects in any of the sentences. Two of the students distinguished subjects from objects but confused direct and indirect objects. The third student also was able to distinguish subjects from objects but only labeled one of the objects in the sentences. This student labeled two of the direct objects correctly but did not identify the indirect objects in those sentences. In the remaining sentences, the student identified indirect objects that actually were direct objects.

Results from the post-test were 19/24. All three students were better able to correctly identify direct and indirect objects after the teaching intervention. For sentences that were song titles, students correctly distinguished the two kinds of objects in 11/12 of them. In the one incorrect answer, a student identified the indirect object correctly but labeled the direct object as an object of the preposition. For the generic sentences, students correctly distinguished direct and indirect objects in 8/12 of them. In the four incorrect sentences, one of the students labeled direct objects as indirect objects and did not label the other object. A comparison of pre- and post-test results is shown in Figure 1.

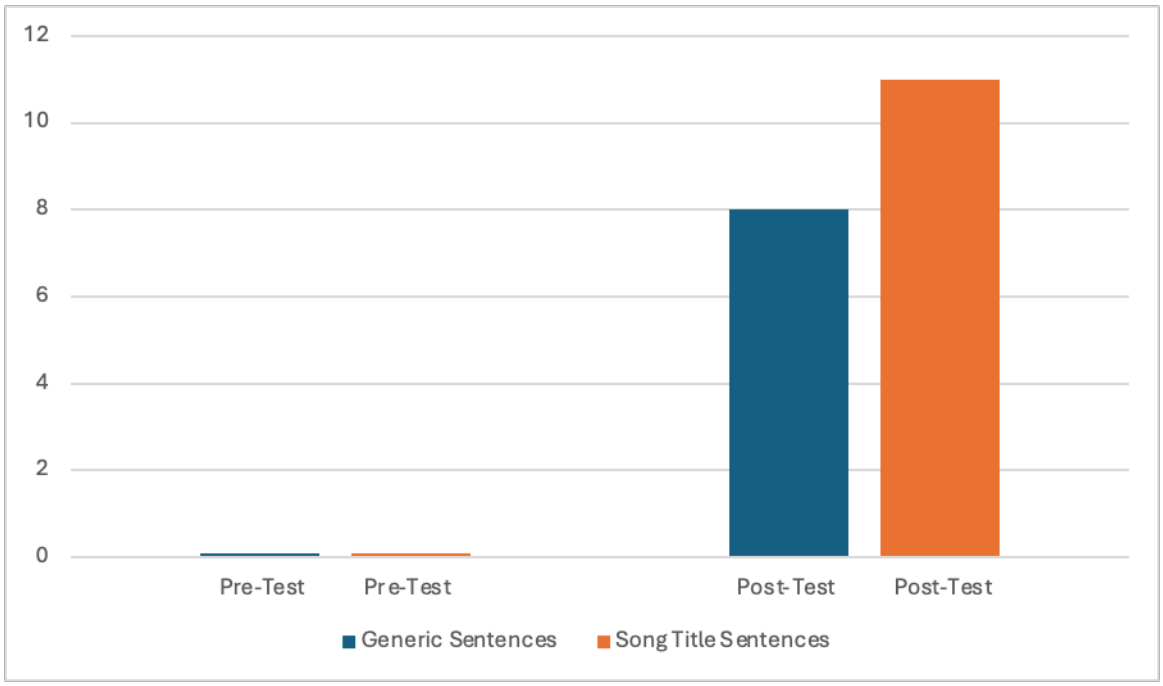

Figure 1
Pre- and post-test results for generic sentences and song title sentences used in an effort to teach the differences between indirect and direct objects in English.

4. Discussion

This discussion will focus on the use of song titles, rather than lyrics, to help teach a specific aspect of English grammar. The reason for this choice is that this study follows a book project that used only titles because of copyright concerns. In a classroom setting where copyright is not as much of a concern, though, all of the points that are brought up in this discussion are equally applicable to lyrics. Indeed, the instructor would have access to a much greater range of popular music texts if lyrics are included.

Song titles from popular music are numerous enough in English that they can be used as examples for almost any aspect of grammar or prose style (see Annex). It should also be noted that these titles are not being used as negative examples. Some language enthusiasts seem to take pleasure from pointing out mistakes in formal grammar in popular song titles and lyrics. A Google search resulted in dozens of websites that take this approach. For example, one grammarian faulted Gwen Stefani for singing "If I was a rich girl" instead of the more formally correct subjunctive mood dependent clause "If I were a rich girl" (Savva). However, students may react negatively to criticism of music that they find important and that become a part of their identity. Thus, L2 instructors are better served by using popular song titles and lyrics as positive examples. The negative critique of song titles is also

counterproductive because it reinforces a generally false binary between correct and incorrect language use.

As English became more widely used around the world during the latter half of the twentieth century, bands began releasing songs in English even if English was not the native language of the band's home country. Thus, L2 learners who wanted to gain fluency in English no longer needed to listen to singers and bands exclusively from English-speaking countries. For example, the Swedish band ABBA recorded dozens of popular hits in English in the 1970s. The Dutch band Golden Earring was also successfully recording in English at this time. The Norwegian band A-ha and the German band The Scorpions continued this trend in the 1980s, while the Swedish band Ace of Bass and Icelandic singer Björk gained notoriety with English-language songs in the 1990s. The Colombian singer Shakira met with success recording in English in the 2000s. A less common approach was to mix English and a singer's native language. The most prominent example of this type of combination was likely the Austrian singer Falco's "Der Kommissar," released in 1982 with a mix of German and English lyrics. English may, ever so slowly, be starting to lose its lock on popular music lyrics, though. Korean-language albums by the Korean band BTS began charting in the United States in 2016; the band didn't record their first song in English until 2020. Even so, English remains a dominant language in popular music and thus an important source of English-language learning.

The indirect and direct objects used in the current study were a part of song titles, and it is thus perhaps unsurprising that the sentences were short. Almost all popular song titles are short.[2] During the teaching intervention between the pre-test and the post-test, students appeared to recognize the typical noun sequence of subject / indirect object / direct object in these short sentences quite quickly. Although writers of song titles and lyrics do experiment with word order on occasion, often to positive effect, changing the order of nouns in an English sentence with an indirect object is challenging and rare. Thus, in the post-test, it is possible that the students were more successful in distinguishing indirect and direct objects from each other because of pattern recognition rather than a clear understanding of their grammatical differences. Nonetheless, the grammar of nearly any language is replete with patterns, and learning to recognize these patterns is an important first step toward deeper understanding.

The use of popular song titles in this study appears to have helped students distinguish indirect objects from direct objects, as well as subjects. Thus, this study may reinforce the notion that song lyrics can be used

[2] A notable exception is Paul Simon's 1983 song "René and Georgette Magritte with Their Dog after the War".

effectively to teach parts of speech in English, as Akbary *et al*. (2018) have demonstrated with phrasal verbs. Even so, other factors such as pattern recognition and/or prior English grammar instruction, may be in play. In the post-test, students scored better on the popular song titles than on the generic sentences. It is not clear that all of the students knew all of the songs, or even any of them. However, just the fact that the students were informed that the sentences were popular song titles seemed to spur an increased ability to recognize indirect objects. It is possible that the use of popular song titles, some of which are likely familiar to students, reduced student stress levels and thus facilitated learning, as found by Dolean (2016) and Chou (2012). Past musical training such as that studied by Fernández de Cañete García *et al*. (2022) was judged not to be a factor in the current study, as nearly all students listen to popular music regardless of whether or not they have engaged in any formal music study. Indeed, Fernández de Cañete García *et al*. (2022) found that prior training in music had no impact on learning (see also Chobert and Besson 2013). Thus, the current study appears to confirm and reinforce results of other recent studies (Lee and Schreibeis 2021; Ludke and Morgan 2022; Sun *et al*. 2024) that have found the use of music, specifically popular song titles and/or lyrics, beneficial for L2 instruction. The current study may be one of the first to use popular song titles in L2 learning specifically for functions of nouns such as indirect and direct objects. It also demonstrates the greater potential effectiveness of popular song titles as compared with generic text that has no intrinsic value to students.

This study is limited by a small sample size and a number of uncontrolled variables such as how much prior instruction in English grammar the students had received, though all of the students were fluent enough in English to attend a university in the United States. Because of the limitations of this pilot study, the results cannot be generalized. Future studies should strive for larger sample sizes and better control of variables. Researchers may also want to determine the students' level of familiarity with song titles that are used and, to get beyond possible grammatical pattern recognition by the students, their level of understanding of the different functionality of indirect and direct objects. Student understanding of this latter concept could, for example, be assessed by asking students to explain the different functions of the indirect and direct objects in a song title such as "You give love a bad name" or "[You] sing me Spanish techno."

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Annex

Song titles can easily be used as examples in the grammar and style topics listed below, each of which includes an example title. A simple sentence is listed first because students seem to gain a better understanding of parts of speech if they are seen in an actual context of use rather than in isolation. Countries of origin are listed for singers or bands whose native language is not English.

Grammar & Style Feature	Example
Simple sentences	"Lightning Crashes" (Live, 1995)
Parts of speech: proper nouns	"Rasputin" (Boney M, 1978, Germany)
Parts of speech: nouns	"Violin" (Amos Lee, 2011)
Parts of speech: pronouns	"Us" (Regina Spektor, 2004, originally Russian)
Parts of speech: pronouns (demonstrative in bold)	"**This** Is Why We Fight" (Decemberists, 2011)
Parts of speech: pronouns (indefinite in bold)	"**Everything** Fades To Gray" (Sonata Arctica, 2009, Finland)
Parts of speech: pronouns (possessive in bold)	"A Rush And A Push And The Land Is **Ours**" (The Smiths, 1987)
Parts of speech: pronouns (relative in bold)	"The Calendar Hung **Itself**" (Bright Eyes, 2000)
Parts of speech: pronouns (interrogative in bold)	"**Who** Knew?" (Pink, 2006)
Parts of speech: pronouns (relative in bold)	"The Girl **Who** Destroys" (Amber Pacific, 2010)
Parts of speech: verbs	"Come" (Jain, 2015, France)
Parts of speech: adjectives (in bold)	"**Strange** Magic" (Electric Light Orchestra, 1975)
Parts of speech: adjectives (definite articles in bold)	"**The** Winner Takes It All" (ABBA, 1981, Sweden)
Parts of speech: adjectives (indefinite articles in bold)	"Tell Me **A** Tale" (Michael Kiwanuka, 2012)
Parts of speech: adjectives (possessive in bold)	"Tears Dry On **Their** Own" (Amy Winehouse, 2006)
Parts of speech: adjectives (comparatives in bold)	"Love Is **Thicker** Than Water" (Andy Gibb, 1978)
Parts of speech: adjectives (superlatives in bold)	"The **Blackest** Lily" (Corinne Bailey Rae, 2010)
Parts of speech: adverbs	"Naturally" (Selena Gomez and the Scene, 2010)
Parts of speech: prepositions (in bold)	"**On** Broadway" (George Benson, 1978)
Parts of speech: coordinating conjunctions (in bold)	"Life Is A Rock, **But** The Radio Rolled Me" (Reunion, 1974)
Parts of speech: subordinating conjunctions (in bold)	"**If** You Leave" (Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark, 1986)
Parts of speech: interjections	"Hallelujah" (Leonard Cohen, 1984)
Singular vs. plural	"Royals" (Lorde, 2013)
Noun phrases	"Freedom Fighter" (Aerosmith, 2012)

Verb phrases (in bold)	"I **Can't Stand** The Rain" (Tina Turner, 1984)
Functions of nouns: subjects (in bold)	"**Love** Hurts" (Nazareth, 1975)
Functions of nouns: complements (in bold)	"I Am **Woman**" (Helen Reddy, 1972)
Functions of nouns: direct objects (in bold)	"I Spit **Roses**" (Peter Murphy, 2011)
Functions of nouns: indirect objects (in bold)	"You Give **Love** a Bad Name" (Bon Jovi, 1986)
Functions of nouns: objects of preposition (in bold)	"After The **Storm**" (Mumford & Sons, 2009)
Pronoun case (objective, in bold)	"On **Whom** The Moon Doth Shine" (Theatre of Tragedy, 2009, Norway)
Sentence function: declarative	"Rumour Has It." (Adele, 2012, period added)
Sentence function: interrogative	"Why Can't We Be Friends?" (War, 1975)
Sentence function: exclamatory	"Hello, Dolly!" (Louis Armstrong, 1964)
Punctuation: serial commas	"Beg, Borrow, Or Steal" (Ray Lamontagne, 2010)
Punctuation: introductory commas	"Hello, I Love You" (The Doors, 1968)
Punctuation: apostrophes (possession)	"Rapper's Delight" (Sugarhill Gang, 1979)
Punctuation: apostrophes (contractions)	"That's All" (Genesis, 1983)
Punctuation: hyphen	"Heart-Shaped Box" (Nirvana, 1993)
Mechanics: italics	"Wreck Of The Edmund Fitzgerald" (Gordon Lightfoot, 1976)
Agreement: pronoun/antecedent (in bold)	"If You Love **Somebody** Set **Them** Free" (Sting, 1985)
Agreement: subject/verb (in bold)	"**Yoshimi Battles** The Pink Robots" (The Flaming Lips, 2002)
Verb mood: indicative	"Dog Days Are Over" (Florence + The Machine, 2009)
Verb mood: imperative	"Shut Up And Drive" (Rihanna, 2007)
Verb mood: subjunctive	"If I Were A Boy" (Beyoncé, 2008)
Verbs: infinitives (in bold)	"Something **To Talk** About" (Bonnie Raitt, 1991)
Functions of nouns: object of infinitive (in bold)	"I Want To Hold Your **Hand**" (The Beatles, 1963)
Verbs: gerunds (in bold)	"Constant **Craving**" (K. D. Lang, 1992)
Functions of nouns: object of gerund (in bold)	"Stop Draggin' My **Heart** Around" (Stevie Nicks with Tom Petty, 1981)
Verbs: present participles (in bold)	"Beds Are **Burning**" (Midnight Oil, 1987)
Verbs: past participles (in bold)	"I **Drove** All Night" (Céline Dion, 1993)
Verb tense: simple present (in bold)	"I **Refuse** To Lose" (Jarekus Singleton, 2014)
Verb tense: simple past (in bold)	"I **Learned** The Hard Way" (Sharon Jones & The Dap Kings, 2010)
Verb tense: simple future (in bold)	"I **Will Remember** You" (Sarah McLachlan, 1999)
Verb tense: present perfect (in	"Success **Has Made** A Failure Of Our Home"

bold)	(Sinéad O'Connor, 1992)
Verb tense: past perfect (in bold)	"We **Had Lost** Our Minds" (Smoke Fairies, 2010)
Verb tense: future perfect (in bold)	"I **Will Have Lived**" (Carole King, 2001)
Verb tense: present continuous (in bold)	"New Orleans **Is Sinking**" (The Tragically Hip, 1990)
Verb tense: past continuous (in bold)	"I **Was Hoping**" (Alanis Morissette, 1998)
Verb tense: future continuous (in bold)	"We **Will Be Singing**" (The Hype Theory, 2011)
Verbs: conditional verbs (in bold)	"Anything **Could Happen**" (Ellie Goulding, 2012)
Verb voice: active (in bold)	"I **Kissed** A Girl" (Katy Perry, 2008)
Verb voice: passive (in bold)	"Once I **Was Loved**" (Melody Gardot, 2015)
Point of view: 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person	"You, Me, and He" (Mtume, 1984)
Figures of speech: metaphor	"Love Is Noise" (The Verve, 2008)
Figures of speech: simile	"Love Is Like Oxygen" (Sweet, 1978)
Figures of speech: onomatopoeia	"Cars Hiss By My Window" (The Doors, 1971)
Figures of speech: alliteration	"You Never Need Nobody" (The Lone Bellow, 2013)
Figures of speech: assonance	"Abandoned And Alone" (Bad Company, 1995)
Figures of speech: irony	"This Song Has No Title" (Elton John, 1973)
Figures of speech: personification	"The Wind Cries Mary" (Jimi Hendrix, 1967)
Figures of speech: rhetorical question	"Who Do You Think You Are?" (Spice Girls, 1996)
Figures of speech: synecdoche	"Would You Give Me A Hand" (Sasha Boole, 2014, Ukraine)
Figures of speech: asyndeton	"Roots, Rock, Reggae" (Bob Marley, 1976)
Figures of speech: polysyndeton	"Deep And Wide And Tall" (Aztec Camera, 1987)
Figures of speech: repetition	"Gone Baby Gone" (James, 2014)
Style: word order	"Jump They Say" (David Bowie, 1993)

The above list is not exhaustive. Other topics, such as using participles as adjectives, perfect continuous verb tenses, most passive voice verb tenses, and additional figures of speech can also be introduced with song titles.