LINGUISTIC HORIZONS



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Measuring identity in the pop music accent

How did you first get into linguistics?

Like many musically-inclined youths, I learned how to play guitar and sing by listening to and copying my favourite songs. Once, I was practicing in my room, when a family friend overheard and admonished me for singing with an 'American accent'. I have been opposed to linguistic prescriptivism ever since!

The pathway I took towards becoming interested in Acoustic Phonetics and Sociolinguistics was less direct. I first attended university to pursue a potential career in music, but after some introspection, I pivoted to English Language and Literature. Following yet more introspection, I doubled-down on Linguistics. It scratched the itch of the analytical side of my brain, which I had neglected for the sake of my creative side.

Yet that musical side of me never went away. I conducted an analysis of the prevalence of US accent features in British popular music from 1950 to 2010 for my undergraduate dissertation, where I found that US accents were ubiquitous among British performers of the '50s (the years of rock'n'roll), far less prevalent during the '70s (the years of punk rock and new wave), and found mixed results from 1990-2010. That initial study became a springboard into several ideas and hypotheses I wanted to explore in relation to performance varieties of English.

What do you look at when you study accent and identity in popular music?

An 'accent' is a distinctive manner of pronunciation, often associated with a geographic location, social class, ethnicity, or other form of identity. William Labov, one of the pioneers of modern Sociolinguistics, famously pointed out that



"There are no single style speakers": nobody consistently speaks in one uniform way in every context. Speakers vary in pronunciation based on how (in)formal an interaction is, how familiar they are with their interlocutor, and how much attention they pay to their own speech. One of the primary questions that drives Sociolinguists is: what is the motivation behind shifts in language style?

There are various schools of thought. One possibility is that UK singers are motivated to use 'American' pronunciation because of a belief that this may enable them to tap into the (real or perceived) financial rewards of the US entertainment industry. However, this motivation would seem to require singers to be consciously aware of what they're doing; based on my research and that of others, it isn't clear that this is the case. There are also many counter-examples, such as the massive across-the-pond success of Arctic Monkeys (whose lead singer, Alex Turner, uses Sheffield pronunciation) and the international success of Scottish duo The Proclaimers. Embedded within this suggestion is that British singers are 'selling-out' or being unacceptably inauthentic when using any American pronunciation. I disagree with this idea.

An alternative motivation might be that singers are changing their pronunciation to accommodate for an American audience, in the same way that speakers have been observed to shift towards the style of their interlocutor to either better communicate with them or to seek 'social attractiveness'. The main problem with this explanation is that singers are rarely in a position where they are directly singing to their audience members. Even in concert, there is a degree of separation, and singers do not modify their performances based on where they're performing: Tom Jones will sound like Tom Jones whether he is performing in Luxembourg, Louisiana, or Llandudno.

Some suggest that some features of American pronunciation are simply easier to sing, such as shifting the 't' in words such as 'matter' to become more like the 'd' in 'madder' (technically, using what is called an 'alveolar flap'). While this is a possibility for *some* pronunciation features, it does not adequately explain every aspect of American-stylised pronunciation that UK singers use, especially the presence of 'r' at the end of words such as 'car', which in most UK accents is not pronounced (i.e. this would be a deliberate insertion).

What questions are you seeking to answer in your current research?

My undergraduate dissertation observed that shifts in pronunciation style appear to fall in line with changes in what genres of music are popular at a particular time. As a result, my main hypothesis is that the primary motivation for language style shifts in music is a need (and expectation) to be

appropriate to the style of music a singer is performing.

To test this, I created karaoke style videos for songs (also crafted by myself) in different genres of music. The lyrics are specifically designed to capture pronunciation features associated with American/British accents. I then invite singers to be recorded singing these songs, record them reading the lyrics in their spoken voice, and finally ask them to complete a questionnaire regarding their experience with music and the notion of authenticity.

My results so far show that pop music stimulus almost ubiquitously elicits American-like pronunciation among UK singers. However, the effect is strongest and most significant when the genre itself is associated with American musicians (hard rock and R&B) and weakest when the genre is associated with non-American or British performers (synth and indie rock). I argue that musical genres are encoded in our shared canon of pop music with specific sets of sound-schemes (e.g. distorted guitars in hard rock and synthesisers in new wave), and that one of the elements of those sound-schemes is the voice of the singer. In the same way that jazz is recognisable due to its weird and wonderful chords and use of improvisation, country music is recognisable due to its banjos, acoustic guitars and use of Southern American English accent features.

What is your average day like as a researcher?

If I'm not networking with musicians and singers, I'm analysing recordings or following endless rabbit-holes of reading journal articles and papers. I also assist my supervisor, Tom Devlin, with marking, teaching phonetics and phonology, and developing teaching for the Speech and Language Therapy course at the University of Huddersfield. As a part-time PhD student I tend to spend most days wishing I was having an average day as a researcher! Unfortunately, though, the bills will not pay themselves.

I am currently busy preparing for a workshop I will be running for Cultures of Sound, which is being organised by the School of Arts and Humanities at the University of Huddersfield, in collaboration with a local initiative, Temporary Contemporary, during which I hope to showcase the local relevance of my research. Being situated in Yorkshire, I am keen to investigate how local music performers approach their own authenticity in song, especially in light of the decline of the Yorkshire dialect itself.

What is your dream linguistics research project?

I would love to have the opportunity to interview professional high-profile singers and ask directly what they think motivates them to use different styles of pronunciation in song. I suspect that many are *not* consciously aware of what they're doing, just like my amateur/semi-professional participants, so I would possibly need to come armed with overt examples of pronunciation features in song that differ from their spoken style. Most linguists who have published in this area have made inferences about motivation based on the application of theory to live or studio recordings, and the singers themselves are rarely (if ever) asked directly in a structured interview.

What advice do you have for young linguists, or those seeking to get into postgraduate research?

My advice is mainly geared towards other potential part-time postgraduate researchers in the same boat as me. Do not be dismayed with your (lack of) progress. You will almost certainly have many other responsibilities (I might be a part-time PhD student, but I will always be a full-time dad), and so it is easy to feel like everything else is a distraction from your research. It isn't – it's just life. I recommend creating structured days that suit your style. Work best on an evening? Then don't stress that you're not being productive during the day. Set that time aside for other activities or obligations.

Finally, it's important not to be an island. It is very easy to end up working remotely and remaining in your own little bubble. I make sure I get on campus to work as much as is practically possible, attend any events and talks I can make time for, and seek ways to get involved. Universities are designed to inspire and have resources that are often simply unavailable at home. Some pesky books just haven't been digitised yet! You also never know who you'll bump into and what kind of networking opportunities will crop up simply by being present. ¶

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