

When Music Transgresses Language: Unraveling the Cultural and Emotional Power of Breaking Linguistic Rules in Musical Composition

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This paper aims to illustrate the use of intentional grammatical and phonological variations in lyrics across many music genres. Focusing on the relationship between language, music, and culture, this paper analyzes why many artists choose to disregard standard grammatical conventions in their musical compositions. The research utilizes various instances from well-known songs to underline the crucial significance of linguistic decisions in improving the aesthetic and emotional impact of the music. This paper also acknowledges the culturally significant syntactic and phonological differences between Standard American English (SAE) and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and their influence on the psychoacoustic experience of music. Ultimately, it illustrates how music serves as a medium for cultural exchange and representation, contributing to a more inclusive and diverse society.

Introduction

The Pirahã language spoken by the Pirahã people in the Amazon rainforest and Standard American English (SAE) are both structured systems of communication, each with its own grammar and vocabulary. However, while SAE strictly adheres to grammatical rules, music often defies these rules and includes errors in lyrics and titles. Surprisingly, these errors can actually contribute to the impact and success of a song. For example, Justin Timberlake's song "What Goes Around, Comes Around" includes the incorrect word "bleded," but still became a hit. This trend is not limited to one song, as many top chart songs intentionally break grammar rules in their titles or lyrics.

It is important to note that many of these grammar rules that are being broken exist within SAE, which has historically been associated with power and used to marginalize other language systems, such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE). AAVE is a native dialect of English that emerged from the interaction between West African languages and English during the transatlantic slave trade. Many songs that may seem to have improper SAE grammar actually abide by the grammatical rules of AAVE, which is widely spoken in African American communities and has a significant presence in various music genres.

By breaking grammar rules, music can adapt to rhythmic constraints, incorporate stylistic choices, and create impressive and moving compositions. The influence of language in music goes beyond syntax and grammar to also encompass the use of sound. Therefore, it is clear that incorrect grammar in music

can enhance its impact and should not necessarily be penalized.

Just like the musical successes mentioned above, thousands of songs don't comply with the rules of grammar but prove to be more impactful that way. However, many of these grammar rules that are being "broken" exist solely within Standard American English (SAE). SAE, also referred to as Academic English, or Mainstream American English, is a form of English that is used by those who historically hold power. In history, many SAE speakers controlled American institutions of higher education. Therefore SAE existed mainly as a written form of English. Although it is the "standard" form of English, not all Americans speak it today because of its patronizing past use. SAE was used to validate many middle and upper class language systems and degrade language systems that existed beyond it. It is integral to recognize that in the United States, many songs that may seem to possess improper SAE grammar actually abide by the grammatical rules that exist within African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Many scholars argue that AAVE is the result of a creole (a language composed of two or more languages for the purpose of communication) acquired from different West African languages and English. Slaves were forced to interact with English speaking slaveholders overseas during their passage to the new world or on land. In need of effective communication, a creole was formed¹. This creole was passed down many generations, still holding an immense presence today. Owning its own set of grammar and vocabulary, AAVE is also considered to be a native dialect of English and is widely spoken in African American urban communities. AAVE also has a large presence in various music genres including hip

hop, R&B and more. Within Standard American English though, it has become apparent that music must breach grammar rules to be more impactful².

Looking through songs of all genres and times, there is a clear pattern regarding the use of incorrect grammar. Correcting such grammar, what many refer to as “mistakes”, will actually prove ineffective. From adapting to rhythmic constraints to including stylistic choices, the use of incorrect grammar is integral to the production of impressive, moving, and rousing music. Additionally, language’s influence in music extends beyond the realm of syntax and grammar to also encompass phonology, or sound use.

Literature Review

Songs that contain incorrect grammar have often achieved great fame and popularity, indicating that these grammar mistakes do not hinder their success. For example, Bob Dylan’s song “Lay Lady Lay” has a grammatically incorrect title, as “lay” should be replaced with “lie” when referring to a person. Similarly, Carly Rae Jepsen’s song “Call Me Maybe” would be grammatically correct as “Maybe Call Me”. Lady Gaga’s “Bad Romance” includes the line “You and me could write a bad romance,” where “You and I” should be used instead of “You and me” to maintain subject-verb agreement. Meghan Trainor’s “Me Too” has the lyric “If I was you, I’d wanna be me too,” which should be corrected to “If I were you, I’d wanna be me too” to indicate a hypothetical situation.

These examples demonstrate that many popular songs intentionally use incorrect grammar. However, it is important to consider the historical and cultural context behind these choices. Many grammatical rules exist within Standard American English (SAE), which has been used to marginalize other language systems, such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE). AAVE, with its own grammar and vocabulary, is considered a native dialect of English and is widely spoken in African American urban communities. Many songs that seem to have improper SAE grammar may actually abide by the grammatical rules of AAVE, reflecting the cultural expression and linguistic background of the artists.

Furthermore, incorrect grammar in songs is not limited to subject-verb agreement. Case theory, which affects the function and sense of sentences and lyrics, is another aspect where errors can be found. For instance, the title “You and I” by Stevie Wonder should be corrected to “You and Me” according to the default case marking in English, which uses the accusative case for nouns that function as the object of a preposition. Similarly, Sean Kingston’s “Me Love” contains the lyric “Away from home, me love,” where “Me” should be changed to “My” for proper case marking.

Even though spelling is not strictly a part of grammar, songs may also include spelling mistakes for artistic purposes. Fergie’s

“Fergalicious” intentionally misspells “tasty” as “tastey” to add a playful and imperfect element to the song. These deliberate deviations from correct spelling and grammar contribute to the authenticity and uniqueness of the music.

Next, the song “Satisfaction” by The Rolling Stones contains the lyric “I can’t get no satisfaction.” In the lyrics of this song, according to SAE the use of double negation is not acceptable. The “correct” form of this lyric that abides by SAE, would read “I can’t get any satisfaction.” However, the use of double negation is acceptable in African American Vernacular English, a dialect of English. In fact, various forms of multiple negation are very common in non-mainstream varieties of English².

Similarly, the song “Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic” by The Police, contains the lyric, “Everything she do just turns me on.” In SAE, this lyric would be considered incorrect as there is no /-s/ suffix included. However in AAVE, there is no inclusion of the /-s/ suffix affecting words like do and have. MUSE forms like “has” and “does” do not exist in AAVE. Therefore the lyric, “Everything she do just turns me on.” would be acceptable. In addition, in AAVE, the /-s/ suffix is also absent in third person present forms do + not. As a result, in AAVE, “don’t” is used while “doesn’t” is not.

Linguistic Analyses and Discussion

Syntax

In music, it is important that the sound and mouthful of words within the song fit well together. It ought to sound natural while also abiding by the given rhythm or melody of the song. Therefore, music is filled with “informal English”, which often does not conform to the rules of grammar in SAE.

Songwriters, singers and the audience, prioritize the way music sounds over the meaning of the lyrics. If songs were to strictly abide by grammar rules within SAE, they would mostly sound inauthentic and worse than they would sound with the incorrect grammar. For instance, The song “What Goes Around, Comes Around” by Justin Timberlake has the following lyrics, as seen in (1):

1. You spend your nights alone and he never comes home
And every time you call him, all you get’s a busy tone
I heard you found out that he’s doin’ to you
What you did to me, ain’t that the way it goes?
When you cheated, girl, my heart bleded, girl
So it goes without sayin’ that you left me feelin’ hurt
Just a classic case, a scenario
Tale as old as time, girl, you got what you deserved

The first two lines in (1), contain words that rhyme with each other: home and tone. Similarly, the next line “When you cheated, girl, my heart bleded, girl” also rhymes. As seen in

(2), if this lyric were to be grammatically correct, it would read “when you cheated by my heart bled”

2. You spend your nights alone and he never comes home
And every time you call him, all you get’s a busy tone
...
When you cheated, girl, my heart bled, girl

Failing to rhyme with “cheated”, “bled” sounds out of place and unnatural. Therefore, although the original lyric, “When you cheated, girl, my heart bled, girl”, is grammatically incorrect, it sounds the best.

Similarly, the song “The Way I Am” by Timbaland proves to be more impactful through its use of incorrect grammar, as seen in (3)

3. “Baby, if you strip, you can get a tip
'Cause I like you just the way you are
(I’m about to strip and I’m well-equipped
Can you handle me the way I are?)
I don’t need the G’s or the car keys
Boy, I like you just the way you are
Let me see ya strip, you can get a tip
'Cause I like, I like, I like”

In the chorus of the song, shown above, there are three lines that end with “are”. The line “'Cause I like you just the way you are”, is the first one. Then, the line after that reads “*Can you handle me the way I are?*”, is a grammatically incorrect line. If this line were to be “correct”, it would be “Can you handle me the way I am” because the subject of this phrase is singular. However, if this change were to be made, the line would no longer end with the word “are” like the rest of the lines in chorus, resulting in a break of flow and pattern.

Likewise, in the song, “Lay Lady Lay”, if the song were to use correct grammar, it would lose its melodic flow. The lyrics in the first verse, (4), of this song is

4. Lay, lady, lay
Lay across my big brass bed
Lay, lady, lay
Lay across my big brass bed
Whatever colors you have
In your mind
I’ll show them to you
And you’ll see them shine
Lay, lady, lay
Lay across my big brass bed
Stay, lady, stay
Stay with your man awhile

The first four lines of this chorus all begin with “Lay”, creating some sort of harmonious and singable pattern. Also, in the

same verse shown above, there is a line “Stay, lady, stay” that is followed by the line “Stay with your man awhile”. Since “Stay” and “Lay” rhyme, replacing “Lay” with “Lie” will compromise the flow and connection of the lyrics throughout the song. The chorus of “Scars to your beautiful”, (5), by Alessia Cara exhibits just this.

5. But there’s a hope that’s waiting for you in the dark
You should know you’re beautiful just the way you are
And you don’t have to change a thing
The world could change its heart
No scars to your beautiful
We’re stars and we’re beautiful

Here, like in any piece of music, it is essential how each syllable lines up with the beats in each measure. In the chorus of this song, the lyric “No scars to your beautiful” is not grammatically correct. However, any other grammatically correct version of this lyric does not successfully fit in with the rhythm of the song. In a specific melody, each note and lyric has its own tempo. For example, a sequence of words that fall on 1/8 or 1/16 notes should hold lyrics that blend well with their following consonants and vowels. Therefore, although “Scars That Make You Beautiful” (the corrected version) and “Scars To Your Beautiful” (the ungrammatical version) both have seven syllables, they fit differently into the song when sung. The correct version does not work with its given melody. Additionally, replacing “No scars to your beautiful” with “Scars That Make You Beautiful” completely changes the meaning of the song. In a lyrical piece like this, it is important to combine words that not only convey clear meanings but also melodically stand without dissonance.

Following this trend, as seen in (6), the song “Fergalicious”, the wrong spelling of a key lyric is employed in order to fit into the rhythm of the song.

6. I’m Fergalicious (hold, hold, hold, hold, hold up, check it out)
Baby, baby, baby
It’ll make you crazy
T to the A, to the S-T-E-Y, girl, you tasty
T to the A, to the S-T-E-Y, girl, you tasty
D to the E, to the L-I-C-I-O-U-S
D to the E, to the, to the, to the, hit it, Fergie

Here, in order for the the phrases “T to the A, to the S-T-E-Y, girl, you tasty” and “D to the E, to the L-I-C-I-O-U-S” to rhythmically line up, it is integral for the the phrase “T to the A, to the S-T-E-Y, girl, you tasty” to have that extra “E” work as another syllable. Although the correct spelling of the word mentioned is “Tasty”, the spelling “Tastey” is crucial towards how the phrase and word fits into the given rhythm of the song. Beyond this fact, the artist Fergie also believed that the inclusion of the “E” would be a deliberate imperfection, which in turn, made these

lyrics read less like formal English and more naturally in a way that showcased Fergie's personality.

There are certain words, that are accepted in AAVE and not SAE, that are very prevalent in songs. As mentioned in the examples section, "Ain't" is one of those words. Despite the common conception, "ain't" is in fact a word. It is a contraction and can mean have not, has not, do not, does not, or did not. Originating in the 18th century, it was deemed proper until the 19th century. "Ain't" and other forms of it like "amn't" were in fact predominantly used by the upper class community. (Why Is "Ain't" Such A Controversial Word?, 2017) It was also accepted and encouraged in the colloquial language of Victorian lords and ladies. This word started to lose its prestige once Charles Dickens began using it in his stories involving Cockney London characters, working class Londoners born within hearing distance of the bells of St. Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside (Boinod, 2020). Additionally, around this time, features of AAVE, like the use of "ain't", developed over time as African Americans adapted their speech pattern through what they were predominantly surrounded by: English speaking slave holders. (African-American Vernacular English, 2023) Following such events, this word was looked down upon and labeled non-standard (Why Is "Ain't" Such A Controversial Word?, 2017). Although many people consider the use of "ain't" improper, it is a legitimate part of many dialects of English, including AAVE.

Phonology

Another branch of linguistics, phonology, focuses on the production and categories of the sounds of language. There are thousands of languages in the world, but only hundreds of speech sounds i.e "sh", "ch", [p], [b], [k], [g]. This is because each language has sounds that form different patterns, making them sound distinct. (Fromkun, Rodman, and Hyams) For instance, in German languages, there is aspiration of initial voiceless stops. To dissect this statement, aspirated sounds are pronounced with the inclusion of a puff of air. Voiceless stops are the sounds like, [p], [t], and [k], that are pronounced without vibration of vocal cords and sounds made by completely blocking the flow of air. Like this phonological process, each language and variety & dialect of language have their own distinct sound patterns. (Kambousiza and Abdolkarmi, 2010).

Focusing on SAE and AAVE, the main language of songs in the American music industry, there are many phonological differences to note. To begin with, they differ in the emphasis and use of final consonant sounds. Usually, some consonants that are fully pronounced in SAE are reduced or even absent in AAVE. (Sligh and Connors, 2003). In AAVE, there is often a simplification of consonant clusters. For instance, when two consonants are at the end of a word, the final consonant is usually dropped, reducing the word. We see examples of this in many popular songs today, like, "Flexin & Finessin by Speaker

Knockerz (7)

7. Flexin', flexin' (Let's go)
I be flexin', flexin' and finessin'
Flexin', flexin' (Yeah)
I be flexin', flexin' and finessin'
Flexin' and finessin', I be flexin' and finessin' (Yeah)

Here, there are many mentions of the word, "Flexin'" and "Finessin". This is the result of the removal of the "g" consonant in the words "Flexing" and "Finessing"

Again, this consonant drop style is seen in "My Power" by Beyonce (8)

8. They'll never take my power, my power, my power
They'll never take my power, my power, my power

The word "power" is pronounced as if the "er" is an "a", like "powa"

Both (7) and (8) represent a prominent phonological feature of AAVE. (Sidnell, 2012).

On the other hand, in SAE, the inclusion and pronunciation of the final consonants of words are required. Almost every song that is written in SAE follows this feature. This mandate is seen in, "Perfect" by Ed Sheeran (9).

9. Baby, I'm dancing in the dark
With you between my arms
Barefoot on the grass
Listening to our favourite song
When you said you looked a mess
I whispered underneath my breath

Here, unlike the (7) and (8), every word that ended with two constants was not reduced by deletion. Words like "dancing", "listening" also ending in "ing" were sung as is.

Another significant difference in phonological features is the pronunciation of the phoneme "th". In AAVE, the voiced "th", like used in "the", "they", and "that" are replaced with "d", resulting in sounds like "de", "dey" and "dat". This is seen in both the title and lyrics of the song, "Who dat boy?" By Tyler, the creator (10)

10. Who dat boy? Who him is?
Who dat boy? Who him is?

Replacing the sound of "th" in "that" with "d", results in the common phrase in this song "who dat boy". This prominent attribute of AAVE is witnessed in numerous songs through decades.

On the contrary, in SAE, it is routine for the "th" to be pronounced as [ð, θ]. It is seen throughout much of the American music industry today. We see this in "Love In The Dark" by Adele, (11)

11. I can't love you in the dark
 It feels like we're oceans apart
 There is so much space between us
 Baby, we're already defeated

There are mentions of the word “the” and “there” that are kept as is, not replacing the “th” with “d”.

Although they may seem miniscule, these phonological differences that exist between AAVE and SAE deeply affect psychoacoustics.

Cultural Implications of Language Use in Music

The use of language in music is reflective of culture. Historically, music was utilized by almost every culture as a medium of expression of beliefs and tradition plus for entertainment at festivals and gatherings. Holding a rhythm, repetition and melody, music is easier for the brain to process and remember and it also has the unique ability to evoke emotional connections. Therefore, music has the power to deeply influence its listeners.

In the same manner, many artists today are able to express their culture through their music. For instance, Enrique Iglesias' Spanish accent gives his audience a taste of his background and culture. Starting his recording career in the Mexican indie label Fonovisa, Enrique Iglesias' became the top-selling Spanish-language act. Writing and singing English/Spanish crossover songs allows him to embrace his culture as a Spanish descendant.

Another great example is Abel Makkonen, known as the weekend, a singer, songwriter and producer. Although he was born in Canada, his family is of Ethiopian origin. Giving tribute to his Ethiopian upbringing, he ends one of his songs “Hills” in an Amharic (the language of Ethiopia) lyric (12)

12. What about love? What about love?
 Translated in Amharic (Ethiopian language):

እውዳሃለው

የኔ ቆንጆ

እውዳሃለው

የኔ ፍቅር ፍቅር ፍቅር ፍቅር ፍቅር

የኔ ፍቅር ፍቅር ፍቅር ፍቅር ፍቅር

English transliteration:
 Ewedihalehu
 Yene konjo,
 Ewedihalehu
 Yene fikir, fikir, fikir, fikir

Yene fikir, fikir, fikir, fikir
 English Translation:
 I love you
 My beautiful one
 I love you
 My love, love, love, love, love
 My love, love, love, love, love

Similarly, Mathangi Arulpragasam, professionally known as M.I.A, references her Tamil identity frequently in her music. Born in London to Sri Lankan Tamil parents, M.I.A references her Tamil culture. One of her songs, “Matangi” , is named after the Hindu goddess of music and speech. (Lewis, 2016) Additionally, this song is filled with desi instrumentation like the tabla, sitar and bansuri (Indian flute), along with several lyrics in Tamil. This is seen in chorus of the song (13)

13. Immina immina thana thana
 Ingana ingana giina giina
 Matangi

M.I.A uses music to express her culture that values education and religion. Another artist by the name of Mitski features her Japanese descent in one of her songs, “First Love/Late Spring” (14)

14. Please, hurry, leave me, I can't breathe
 Please don't say you love me

胸がはち切れそうで

(Unaga chiki we sore)
 English Translation:
 I feel like my chest will burst

As seen here, Mitski incorporates Japanese lyrics in her song as means of expressing her polite and humble Japanese culture.

As seen in (12), (13), (14), many artists use music as a way to tribute, express and convey their culture to audiences.

Methodology and Limitations

When conducting research for this paper, the researcher deliberately chose a heterogenous variety of musicians, including those who sang primarily in Standard American English, those who sang in other dialects of English, as well as musicians whose music was in multiple languages. This allowed her research to draw from a larger data sample set, in order to more accurately form conclusions about the manners in which modern-day musicians code-switch phonologically and semantically for added emotive and cultural impact on the production of their art.

One of the limitations the researcher faced as she conducted research for this study was the inability to ensure the reliability of findings using survey techniques like inter-coder reliability. In addition, due to each musical piece often being understood societally in a larger contextual framework, each artist and the music they produce may not always be simply comparable. Transcribing musical lyrics, particularly when background music, accompaniments, artistic pronunciation choices, and other factors are involved, tend not to be straightforward, and the lack of a standardized process for this transcription also was a limitation in her research.

Concluding Remarks

Many influential artists, ranging from Bob Dylan to Beyonce to Justin Bieber, continuously dismiss basic grammar rules that exist within linguistics. Artists mainly do this in order to create a natural, authentic tone to their music and ensure that there is no jarring between the lyrics and melody. These are one of the most important components of a song. However, as mentioned before, we must recognize that although a lot of “incorrect” grammar is considered improper in SAE, it may not be the same for AAVE. AAVE has consistent grammar, vocabulary, and phonetics making it a definite dialect. The cultural mechanisms of music are impacted not just by syntactic elements like grammar, but also sound-based, or phonological elements. Analyzing the recent trend of songs, it is apparent that these “mistakes” are almost always intentional. In fact, transcending rules in linguistics is almost essential towards the impact of music.

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