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Grammatical variability in British popular music Competing explanatory models

The “Americanization” of non-American popular music is a long-standing area of concern in the sociolinguistics of music (e.g., Trudgill 1983; Flanagan 2019). In this paper, I present grammatical evidence from British music that seeks to examine the phenomenon. I argue that, in a similar fashion to accent, the ‘referee’ (Bell 2002) of British songs is most likely American songs.

The data for research is drawn from the *British Popular Music Corpus of English* (PMCE-UK). This 1,400,000-word corpus, created by the author, contains 5,500 British singers’ songs that appeared in the top 20 of British music charts from 1953-2009 (Smith 2016).

To conduct my analysis of the possible ‘Americanization’ of British music, I identified grammatical forms that index “American”. Following Alim (2002), who claims that such forms appear more frequently in songs than in speech, I conducted a keyword analysis on the PMCE-UK (target corpus) and BNC (reference corpus). Four different forms were identified as positive keywords that could signal ‘Americanization’ in music: *ain’t*, multiple negation, third person *don’t*, and intensifier *so*. I used a questionnaire as a further measure of the indexical links between the forms and American English to confirm that these variables are indeed perceived as ‘American.’

The frequency of the variables in the PMCE-UK were examined, as well as the effects of genres and diachronicity. The patterns were then contrasted with possible ‘referees’ (e.g., American song lyrics, American English speech, export rate, and popularity rate of UK singers). Similar to previous phonological studies, I find a high level of similarity between British and American lyrics, suggesting a similar influence of American music on British music.

References

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