

'Americanness' in British song lyrics: The case of intensifiers

Ayano WATANABE

There has been a widespread interest in 'Americanness' amongst British singers in the last few decades (e.g., Beal 2009; Simpson 1999; Trudgill 1983). Singing in American accents is popular with UK artists, as a recent article in *The Telegraph* entitled 'Why you put on an American accent when you sing' demonstrates. Whilst such articles lament the tendency for British singers to employ US accents in singing instead of using their UK accents, linguistic accounts have suggested a number of explanations for this singing style. Generally, such research has addressed the following questions, which are also the focus of my research:

1. How do British singers adopt American English in singing?
2. Why do British singers sing like this? Is this an attempt to imitate American songs?

My research departs from the study of accent and builds on Werner's (2012) work which shows that the use of linguistic features which are often associated with American English usage is also found at a lexico-grammatical level. This paper will therefore scrutinize the frequency of lexico-grammatical variants associated with US English in contemporary British songs. The focus of the paper will be intensifiers such as *very* and *so*. Previous research (e.g., Aijmer 2018) has reported that certain intensifiers often appear much more readily in either British English corpora or US English corpora (e.g., *real* for 'Americanness' or *well* for 'Britishness'), which makes these features ideal for the purpose of this study.

The paper will introduce two song lyrics corpora: British Popular Music Corpus of English (PMCE-UK) and American Popular Music Corpus of English (PMCE-US). Each corpus contains approximately 5,500 British/American singers' songs (ca. 1,500,000 words) which appeared in the top 20 of Smith's (2016) British charts and *Billboards'* American charts from 1953-2009, respectively. A frequency comparison between British National Corpus (BNC) and Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBCSAE) permitted me to calculate the proportion of intensifiers indexing either American English or British English in the PMCE-UK as well as in the PMCE-US. The effects of musical genre as well as other factors such as the songwriter's nationality and whether a song is a cover version were also examined.

In total, 1,200 intensifier tokens were extracted from the PMCE-UK. The analysis demonstrates that British songs have a very high use of intensifiers associated with US English (e.g., *so*, *real*) (90%). Diachronic analysis revealed that proportion of 'US' intensifiers is stable, with a slight increase in the 1990s-2000s. Moreover, I found that the 'US' variants are almost categorical in hip hop and less frequent in other genres (e.g., pop), indicating that genres play an important role in the variable choice. By contrast, other factors were not very effective. It is important to note that these patterns are similar to those found in the PMCE-US. Following Bell's (2001) *Referee Design*, the patterns would reflect the songwriter's attempt to accommodate to American music, while other explanations (e.g., accommodation to the intended audience) are also possible.

References

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