

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's** "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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