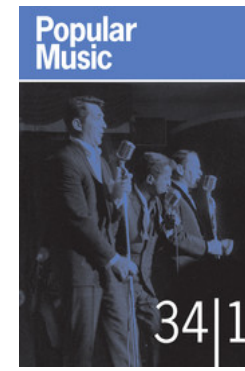

The when, where, and who of pop lyrics: the listener's prerogative

Tim Murphey

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TIM MURPHEY

That we identify with those around us, whether in novels, movies, poetry, songs, the news or on the street, is natural. To a certain extent we mirror what we perceive, but we also perceive it in our own ways and make it fit, to a certain extent, our concept of the world. However, we, and the things we communicate, are also moulders. How much we mould and how much we mirror is difficult to discern, and of course problematic in something like objective news reporting.

The degree to which this identification-mirror-moulding principle is capable of being used is probably most poignantly evident in advertising. Advertisements come in two basic formats, either very explicit or relatively vague, permitting and stimulating a personal interpretation.

> Basically by allowing room for many interpretations, the advertiser increases the possibility of attracting a wide range of customers, each of whom could potentially find something in the message that could be patterned from their own experiences, etc. Also, to the extent that the effort of patterning is that of the individual, there is potentially a greater sense of achievement, 'involvement' if you will, in having 'closed' the message structure to some meaningful whole. (Rotzoll 1985, p. 103)

In front of Rembrandt's 'Man in a Golden Helmet' we are all going to see more or less the same thing. In front of an abstract painting, we can each have our own interpretations, and create meaning idiosyncratically for ourselves. However, if the effort to construct meaning is too great, and the effect (pay-off) too small, we may abandon the attempt, and take a negative attitude toward the thing as incomprehensible. Of course those who exercise interpreting get better and become more appreciative of certain styles, but mainly because they have invested a part of themselves in the doing. Each time they confirm a style in which they have invested, they are in effect confirming themselves.

My suggestion here is that pop lyrics could be seen in a similar way. Pop songs leave themselves open to the same completion and appropriation as some advertisements. They do this partly by leaving unnamed and imprecise the designation of the pronouns in songs, and by the absence of time and place referents.

Furthermore, analysis reveals that songs contain the language of conversations in a situation. However, since the context of the song is so loosely constructed, the only situation explicitly available is the extra-musical one of the listener (since the songs mention no time, place or precise names). In other words, the listener would seem to be able to complete the message, or make sense of the song, through using the persons, times and places from their own physical and metaphysical situation.

The corpus and procedure

The top fifty songs in English were taken from the 12 September 1987 edition of *Music & Media*'s Hot 100 chart (see Appendix at the end of this article). This date had been designated four months beforehand in order to be non-biased in the selection, following Gerbner's model of message-systems analysis (1985) and Brooks' plea to be 'tasteless' in our research (1982). It should be noted that one song was unavailable in my environment at the time of the study, the thirty-ninth song, thus the next highest one was taken, number 70. The nineteen non-English songs mixed in the first seventy and the one unavailable one in English were excluded from the material to be analysed.

A word count, content analysis, role analysis and discourse typology were done for each song and totals made for the fifty songs. A variety of criteria were considered to attempt to judge the songs' complexity and discourse functions. What follows are partial results which tend to confirm the thesis of this article.[1]

'You'

Table 1 shows that 86 per cent of the songs contain unspecified 'you'-referents (however, 22 per cent are not principal referents, i.e. are only mentioned in passing and not addressed throughout), 12 per cent of the songs have no 'you'-referent, while only one song has a precise referent for 'you' (Song 49 'Josephine'). Although our logic tells that it is not possible that we are being addressed directly, subconsciously (and perhaps illogically) we may receive the messages as directed toward us. This type of unspecified addressing may be compared to the

Table 1. Song content analysis

'You'	32	unspecified
	11	unspecified but not as a principal referent
	6	no referent
	1	One specified referent (Josephine)
'I'	47	unspecified
	1	unspecified but not principal referent (Song 3 'Who's that girl?')
	1	no referent (Song 30 'Wipeout'; N.B. does include 'we')
	1	specified (Song 47 'Alex is the name that I go by')
Time	47	unspecified moment of speech production
	2	specified only 'night'
	1	specified only 'summertime'
Place	40	completely unspecified place of production
	9	implied place of production with varying degrees ('I'm taking a ride', 'dance', 'gimme a little bass')
	1	precise place: California, beach, (Song 30 'Wipeout')
Love	14	love (beginning)
	12	love (2 of which could clearly be religious love songs 36 & 41)
	14	love (ending, over, remembering)
	10	other themes (7 life-searching, 1 vacation, 1 Alice in W., 1 roadblock (?))

phenomenon of someone shouting 'hey you' on the street and everybody turning to look, thinking perhaps they are being addressed. The chances are small for each of us that we are the one among the many being addressed. We know that, nevertheless we turn. The difference on the street is that we soon realise when we turn to see the direction of the speaker that we are not being called, while with the song there is usually no evidence that we are not being addressed. Thus, whatever the ways we might choose to use songs subconsciously or consciously, they are never challenged.

'Me'

Table 1 also indicates that one song had no 'I' referent, one song specified who 'I' was (Alex), and another only had 'I' in passing, not as a principal role. Thus, 94 per cent of the songs had unspecified 'I' referents. Songs apparently say what some listeners want to say anyway, literally putting the words into their mouths as they sing along. The fact that the 'I' in the song has no name makes it easier for the listener to appropriate the words. Although every American youth knows Bruce Springsteen sings 'Born in the USA', when they hear it and sing along they also are exclaiming that they were 'Born in the USA'.

'Me' and 'You'

A word count revealed that 'I' was the most frequent word, occurring 586 times, while 'You' was second with 513. However the total referents to first person (my, mine, etc.) were 1313 and to second person were 737. This excludes imperatives and questions, a total of 511 out of the 2061 sentences, or 25 per cent of the sentences in the corpus; and it excludes such addressing words as 'baby', 'boy', and 'girl'). Total first-person referents amounted to 10 per cent of the total words, while second-person referents, as counted, contributed 5 per cent.

Time and place

Table 1 shows that 94 per cent of the songs have no time of enunciation whatsoever and 80 per cent have no place mentioned. Even when the times and places are mentioned, or implied, they are usually vague themselves (night, summertime, and car, disco). In no song are precise dates or hours given, and in only one was there a named place (Song 30 'Wipeout' – California, beach).

Gender: singer, lyrical speaker, addressee

A further indicator of the parameters of the pop song *situation d'énonciation* may be given by the gender of the singer, and the genders implied by the lyrics. When heterosexual love is the assumed intention of love statements, then the addressee is assumed to be of the opposite sex to the singer. However, in our age, and especially in pop songs, the addressee has become somewhat unisex and the homo as well as heterosexual expression of love is permitted on the airwaves. Table 2 shows that 58 per cent of the singers are male, while 30 per cent are female and 10 per cent are male/female duets, with one song sung by a mixed group. Out of the fifty songs, six are also sung by groups (defined as two people of one sex or three or more singers) but only one actually uses the pronoun 'we'.

Table 2. Singers' gender

Sung by males	29	58% (includes 2 male groups)
Sung by females	15	30% (includes 3 female groups)
Sung by m/f duets	5	10%
Sung by m/f group	1	2%
Total groups	6 (3 female, 2 male, 1 mixed) (only 1 uses 'we')	

Table 3. Lyric genders

A	Explicitly mentions gender of singer[1]	6
B	Implication of sex of singer through referring to a 'he' or a 'she' (in heterosexual love)	17
C	A+B combined in same song	4
D	Songs with no gender reference of speaker or addressee	31

[1]e.g. Song 16 'When I was a small boy'.

Lyrically, we see in Table 3 that only four songs (C) designate both the sex of the enunciator and subject/addressee (see below for an explanation of this term). No gender reference is given in 62 per cent of the songs (D) which thus could be sung by either sex without changing the words, while another thirteen of the remaining songs in (B) could be sung by the other-sexed singer by simply changing the sex of pronouns (unless homosexual love is to be expressed). While a total of 78 per cent are sung by one person (monologues), their lyrics are mostly diagonal to the extent that they address a non-specific 'you'. Only 12 per cent, six songs in (A), are definitely written to be sung by one sex to another.

Thus, the non-gender character of most lyrics, the possibility of them being sung by either sex for either sex, is another imprecise feature of these pop songs. The listeners can, or must, fill in the genders from their own psychological stock of preferences. Of course the androgynous characteristics of many voices and the 'image' of many singers plays upon this ambiguous possibility. The saying that 'when you are hetero and homosexual you double your chances on Saturday night' may apply equally in the popularity of pop songs.

Subject-addressee fluctuation

On its own the pronoun 'you' has no gender and it is a predominant item in the corpus. However, some address forms have the power of 'you' but do give gender, e.g. 'boy' or 'girl'. Among the seventeen songs above which provided gender forms to the subject-addressee, six were of the addressee type 'hey girl, you are . . .', six were simply third person singular 'he said . . .', while five fluctuated between these two. In the latter group, the lyrics may switch from an addressing mode to a naming or describing mode in which pronouns apparently refer to the 'you' addressed elsewhere in the song. A few examples will make clear this fluctuation:

Song 6
I need a man who'll take a chance . . .
don't you wanna dance,

Song 15
I've never seen a pretty girl look so tough, baby
You got that look

Song 28
oh I do anything, for little runaway girl
sad and lonely and blue
gettin' over you

This fluctuation, or apparent confusion over who is being addressed and who the subject is, resembles Piaget's description of a child's egocentric speech (1923). Often the child addresses those in his surroundings with little concern about whether he or she is heard and often doesn't wait or want a response. Children also often speak out loud what they are doing as they do it or think it, apparently describing with little concern for an addressee. And finally children learn the magic of words, that they can replace action just as they can accompany it, that the words are actions and that anything can *be* when we say it (at least psychologically). To a great extent pop song discourse may be seen as an extension of egocentric language into adolescence and adulthood.

Typifying pop song discourse

Bronckart (1985) has developed an interactive typology approach to classifying texts, a model formulated and reformulated over the last ten years. Bronckart's model looks at three things: extra-linguistic parameters, linguistic operations and textual surface markers. The interaction between these three allow the typology of different texts. Simply stated, different types of actions in different situations result in different types of texts which have markers which should tell us about the situation and operations which produced them.[2]

According to the extra-linguistic parameters, pop song belongs in Bronckart's 'narration' category because it is 'literary, in its extended meaning, its goal is to entertain a socio-cultural group, with its intended audience being the members of this group, totally independent of the parameters concerning the act of production'. However when the language of pop songs is analysed by his twenty-seven item grid,[2] it comes out as 'situational discourse (SD)' defined as:

> text produced in direct relation with the context, in particular with identifiable interlocutors, with a precise moment and place of production, and which is organized by constant reference to this context; in its extreme form, SD is a dialogue about the states and events in the context of the exchange. (Bronckart *et al.* 1985, p. 63, my translation)

The incongruity between the extra-linguistic parameters and the definition of the language after analysis by Bronckart's grid leads to a new explanation of the possible impact and use of songs. A closer look at the definition of SD reveals several psychologically salient features of song which are not superficially accessible. First, SD is 'text produced in direct relation with the context . . . with a precise moment and place of production, and which is organized by constant reference to this context'. As already noted, any traces of precise moments and places, and references to them, are remarkably absent from the language of the pop songs. They may in fact exist psychologically for the songwriter or singer when the text is written or recorded, but no evidence of the moments and places are left. So how can this description be felicitous?

To answer this we must look at the moments and places of audition in the

listener's world. The suggestion here is that the reproduction of a song in a given environment may take on the time and place specificity of that environment. For the listener, the song text, if received as relevant, takes on meaning in and for that context. It is assigned associative meaning as it accompanies the present thoughts, feelings and actions of the auditor in the listening situation. The song furnishes, or provides a personal film score to, a particular environment at a particular time and has meaning according to the auditor's situation. Meaning apparently does not simply exist, it is created by the receiver. Rehearing a song, as nearly everyone experiences, will also bring with it associations formed from previous auditions as we often remember where we were, who we were with, and what we were doing with particular songs. Although much anecdotal evidence exists to support this hypothesis, on-line psycholinguistic research is needed to confirm or refute it and to understand its complexity.

The 'constant reference' in our above definition may be seen as contiguous sound through a length of time and acoustically refers to itself and everything in its environment during the time that it exists. Repetitive reference is given by recurring themes and hooks, musically and lyrically, but also associatively by the other things one experiences during the song's audition.

The definition of SD also stipulates 'identifiable interlocutors'. As was noted, the identification of participants were not textually traceable in 90 per cent of the songs. However, one of the salient characteristics of the songs analysed is the extreme degree of first- and second-person pronouns, albeit with no precise referent. Again to understand this phenomenon, one needs to look at the listener's world. I would hypothesise that to the extent that the auditor is permeable to the song's influence, the 'you' and 'I' take on personal meaning for present, remembered, idealised or desired affective relationships, consciously or unconsciously. Thus the identifiable interlocutors become the listener and/or anyone else that the listener cares to include in (or who invades) their privately constructed world.

Vygotsky's inner speech

Piaget (1923) said egocentric speech simply vanished at the school age of a child. Vygotsky (1934) interpreted it as having a more useful function: for him egocentric speech was 'speech for one's self', but speech which the young child at first thinks is social and communicative to others. Gradually the child loses this illusion, that others are attending to this sort of speech, and it becomes silent; that is, the child uses words for thinking and they don't have to be pronounced out loud, they can be simply conceived silently and secretly inside the mind. Thus, for Vygotsky, egocentric speech goes underground and becomes inner speech. The value of egocentric speech is that it is a manifestation of eventual inner speech and an indication of how we use words to think. Vygotsky said, based upon studies of egocentric speech, that there are three general characteristics of inner speech: it is highly predicalized, deals with sense instead of meaning, and is silent. What does all this have to do with pop songs? Possibly a lot.

Although the pop songs analysed above resembled most closely Bronckart's situational discourse, out of the three general types certain extreme characteristics do indicate that the songs have a character of their own. While situational discourse has the highest verb count of the three types, pop songs has a much higher one, i.e., the songs are highly predicalized, similar to inner speech. When we think, and when

we process songs, we don't need to name things, they are part of the known, we concentrate apparently on the actions. The pronouns in songs which have no precise referents seem to confirm this lack of nominalization and emphasis on semantical predication. Also, while situational discourse may often give time and place reference, the pop songs give very few, i.e. leaving the predication semantically open to any time and place. Sense, for Vygotsky, represents all the possible connections and interpretations (see also Eco, 1979), while meaning is one contextually fixed interpretation. In these respects, the pop songs analysed are somewhat isomorphic with inner speech and thus may lend themselves to the same general semantical processing. One might even venture to say, music and song only mean something specific to music critics, to the rest of us they merely make an abundance of sense.

I am not proposing that pop songs are inner speech, merely trying to show that part of song's attraction may lie in its structures which appear to be somewhat isomorphic with the material the brain uses to perform inner thinking. The fact that songs are out loud and are frozen language flagrantly dissolves any attempt to call them inner speech and thought. However, interestingly enough, technology has allowed us to add inner speech's quality of silence to song through the use of the walkman. The powerful attractiveness of the walkman in fact may be that we can have this inner speech camelon to ourselves, while excluding other sound contenders and nevertheless including the whole environment that we are moving through. The outer world becomes something similar to our inner thoughts through the isomorphistic and unifying quality of song. Of course, I may be exaggerating the contribution of lyrics, for certainly the music alone can do this in its pure semantical predication. Hosokawa (1984) says the walkman's use results in 'a mobility of the Self' not 'a self-enclosed refuge' or 'narcissistic regression' (p. 175). The experience is like attending a 'secret theatre' in which everyone around the listener is either performer or spectator. Powerful inner speech (the fantasy source of good novelistic writing?) could be seen as operating in a similar fashion as we construct our own worlds, real and imaginary.

Furthermore, the development of inner speech from egocentric language may be analogous to the creation of an internal invisible and inaudible walkman, or rather 'talkman'. In other words, if pop songs on a walkman are somewhat isomorphic with the workings of inner speech, then one might say that egocentric speech is similar to the pre-walkman forms of un-secret music broadcast (e.g. radio or hi-fi equipment): it is shared with all those around us, they know from what starting point our minds might be working, whereas with a walkman it is a secret. One difference, however, is that we are telling everyone that we have a secret when we wear a walkman, whereas it may not be so evident with inner speech and thought (Hosokawa 1984).

Conclusions

I am suggesting that the resemblance of the songs to situational discourse reflects our psycholinguistic processing of them although objectively we know that they are not conversations. (We also objectively know other things while allowing them to affect us differently, e.g. advertising.) Thus, song may be called pseudo-dialogal or a form of Piaget's (1923) egocentric language or Vygotsky's inner speech, a form of egocentric language that at first may be pronounced for us but is soon appropriated

by us, psychologically and subvocally if not actually sung aloud. Frith (1983, pp. 35–7) seems to agree when he says that:

> [the goal of songs is] to transform our experience . . . into a live immediate relationship – a relationship not only with the singer but also with other listeners . . . [but listeners must contribute], applying the words to their own situations.

Again, the songs in this corpus, and other songs like them, are not usually narratives of precise past events, but rather participants in on-going situations. Each song forms a part of the auditor's discourse, a participant whose production is vague enough to allow its meaning to be individually given by each auditor personally, with no interpretation being challenged. But, at the same time, auditors may be just as content to use the *sense* in songs without posting any specific *meaning*, letting the associative encoding operate as it will. To this extent, such songs are like non-threatening, affectively communicating teddy-bears-in-the-ear (Albert and Murphey 1984), and allow us to make of them the personal soundtracks for our lives.

Endnotes

1 This article is drawn from a portion of the research towards a PhD in Applied Linguistics at the Université of Neuchâtel. The corpus was also analysed for complexity with the following results: TTR=0.08, rate of words per minute=85; on Flesch's readability scale (syllable length 1.2 and sentence lengfth 6 words) the songs scored 97 (reading level of an American child after four years of schooling). On Flesch's human interest scale (based on personal words and some of the personal sentences) the songs scored 84 (dramatic and full of human interest).

2 Bronckart's grid analyses have been done only with French texts up till now. Using a linguistic tool devised for another language is far from ideal. The tentative conclusions above have validity only insofar as the two languages have similar linguistic elements with similar distributions. However, much of what the grid reveals was already discovered in the other analyses and merely serves to reinforce them. Of principal interest is the description of situational discourse as it may apply to the psychological use of songs.

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Appendix: Songs analysed in the research

From *Music and Media* Hot 100 chart singles – 12 September 1987

1 'I Just Can't Stop Loving You', Michael Jackson
2 'It's a Sin', Pet Shop Boys
3 'Who's That Girl', Madonna
4 'Call Me', Spagna
5 'Nothing's Gonna Stop Me Now', Samantha Fox
6 'I Wanna Dance With Somebody', Whitney Houston
7 'What Have I Done to Deserve This?', Pet Shop Boys w/ Dusty Springfield
8 'I Want Your Sex', George Michael
9 'The Living Daylights', A-Ha
10 'Didn't We Almost Have It All', Whitney Houston
11 'Funky Town', Pseudo Echo
12 'Alone', Heart
13 'I Heard a Rumour', Bananarama
14 'Never Let Me Down Again', Depeche Mode
15 'U Got the Look', Prince
16 'True Faith', New Order
17 'La Isla Bonita', Madonna
18 'Just Around the Corner', Cock Robin
19 'Bridge to Your Heart', Wax
20 'Boys', Sabrina
21 'I Love to Love', Tina Charles
22 'Living in a Box', Living in a Box
23 'FLM', Mel & Kim
24 'Toy Boy', Sinitta
25 'I'm Not in Love', Johnny Logan
26 'Animal', Def Leppard
27 'Never Gonna Give You Up', Rick Astley
28 'Sweet Sixteen', Billy Idol
29 'Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now', Starship
30 'Wipeout', Fat Boys & The Beach Boys
31 'Sweet Little Mystery', Wet Wet Wet
32 'Roadblock', Stock Aitken Waterman
33 'Wishing Well', Terence Trent D'Arby
34 'Wonderful Life', Black
35 'Heart and Soul', T'Pau
36 'With or Without You', U2
37 'Whenever You're Ready', Five Star
38 'Some People', Cliff Richard
39 'The Rhythm Divine', Yello
40 'The Motive', Then Jerico
41 'Hourglass', Squeeze
42 'Casanova', Levert
43 'Dance Little Lady', Tina Charles
44 'Always', Atlantic Starr
45 'Jive Talkin' ', Boogie Box High
46 'Fake', Alexander O'Neal
47 'Girlfriend in a Coma', The Smiths
48 'Labour of Love', Hue & Cry
49 'Josephine', Chris Rea
50 'Everything I Own', Boy George