

POP SONG LYRICS THROUGH THE LENS OF SOCIOLINGUISTICS

A case study of Bob Dylan's lyrics

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Abstract – Pop song lyrics are unique communicative artifacts within contemporary culture on account of their distinctive semiotic properties, characterized as they are by a close relationship between music and words which imposes substantial constraints on text constitution and song structure, involving special rhetorical, rhythmic and phonic features, sometimes accompanied by some “poetic” (in Jakobson’s sense) stylistic devices. But lyrics are also unique for their ability to mirror many important themes of contemporary culture and capture socio-cultural moods and changes. This means that the language of pop song lyrics tends to be socially connoted and may bear traces not only of the author’s linguistic background, but also of diatopic and diastratic variation. This is why lyrics can be seen as ideal objects to be investigated by means of sociolinguistic analytical tools. This study aims at testing this idea, by applying a sociolinguistic approach to a case study, Bob Dylan’s song lyrics (1961-1970). In the article, an analysis of their most meaningful linguistic features is presented, discussing their phonological, morphological and syntactic peculiarities also in the light of quantitative data obtained through corpus linguistics. Their significance is discussed in the perspective of the artist’s linguistic identity, but also as documents of authentic usage of spoken AmE. The findings confirm that interesting results can be attained by taking a sociolinguistic approach to the analysis of pop song lyrics.

Keywords: pop song lyrics; sociolinguistics; Bob Dylan; text for music; American English.

1. Introduction

Studies of musical discourse explore a wide variety of genres, some of which are metadiscursive/metamusical (i.e. they consist of ‘talk about music’), while others take account of the musical element as part of the semiotic makeup of the works investigated, based on the recognition that music functions as a discourse component, along with the linguistic element (Bristiger and Dalmonte 1990). This emerges clearly in Aleshinskaya’s essay on the analysis of musical discourse and its diversity, where she lists seven representative genres within it: song lyrics, live performances, musical interviews and reviews, Internet forums, academic publications, and jam

sessions (Aleshinskaya 2013, p. 423). In actual fact, it could be argued that *stricto sensu* only one of these genres does qualify as musical discourse in its own right: song lyrics. Of the other genres, two – live performances and jam sessions – include musical products but also oral texts aimed at entertainment, while four – musical interviews and reviews, Internet forums, academic publications – are only metamusical.

Lyrics will be at the centre of this discussion of the discourse of music as a privileged object of investigation from the viewpoint of applied linguistics although there are also other genres actually involving a synergy between music and language.¹ For instance, the opera is another important and long-lived genre combining the two, with librettos providing excellent research material especially for philology and language history (cf. e.g. Giovannini and Skorinkin 2024; Pavan 2019, 2020).

From the viewpoint of applied linguistics, pop song lyrics are unique communicative artifacts within contemporary culture on account of their distinctive textual properties, characterized as they are by a close relationship between music and words which imposes substantial constraints on text constitution and song structure, involving special rhetorical, rhythmic and phonic features (e.g. alliteration, rhyme, etc.), sometimes accompanied by some “poetic” stylistic devices. Lyrics are also unique for their ability to mirror many important themes of contemporary culture and capture socio-cultural moods and changes. In the age of mass communication and media, thanks to their broad circulation and extensive penetration (Adorno 1941/1998) songs reflect various aspects of contemporary society and, at the same time, address topical issues, often assuming cultural and political significance (Garzone 2012) through more or less explicit stance-taking, which in some cases may have a non-negligible impact on public opinion.

This study takes an approach to the analysis of pop song lyrics based on sociolinguistics, an area of linguistics that explores the relationship between language and society focusing on language variation as a function of different variables (geography, social class, gender, age, etc.), and tests its effectiveness in this type of research, by applying it to a case study, Bob Dylan’s song lyrics (1961-1970). This will also provide an opportunity to discuss the vexed question of the language variety and pronunciation used by that Nobel Laureate artist.

The article is organised as follows. The complexity of the song as a semiotic event will first be discussed (§1.1), and materials and methods introduced (§1.2). Then, after a brief introduction to Dylan’s poetics (§2), some textual and stylistic aspects that are recurrent in his texts will be examined (§2.1), before proceeding to the actual sociolinguistic analysis of

¹ For an overview of music with text, cf. Lewis 2011.

their phonological, morphological and syntactic peculiarities (§2.2), whose significance will be discussed in the perspective of the artist's linguistic identity. Conclusions (§3) will follow on the usefulness of sociolinguistics in the analysis of song lyrics.

1.1. Complexity of the 'song' as a semiotic event

The song is a semiotic event of great complexity in which the linguistic component, in its various aspects, phonic-prosodic, lexical, syntactic and semantic, is associated with the musical element, as well as with a whole series of other factors relating to performance. Therefore, it is rather difficult to clarify rationally the role played by each of these different components in the process of signification (Middelton 1990, pp. 256, 300ff.). The combination of words and music determines a situation of "multiple stratification" of the signifier (text, music, musical performance, singing performance), further complicated by the nature of the system of articulation of music which, as Umberto Eco makes clear, is not simply double, like that of language, but presents multiple and differential articulations (Eco 1975, pp. 231-233).

In this respect, an analogy emerges between texts for music and poetry, an analogy that can be easily identified thanks to certain superficial features such as the structuring into stanzas, the crucial importance of the phonic-rhythmic aspect, the repetition of certain phrases or paragraphs (e.g. the refrain, but not only), often highlighted by the presence of the rhyme (BaileyShea 2021). All these elements can be traced back to one single aspect that the language of song lyrics and the language of poetry have in common, namely the prevalence of the poetic function: in the text for music "the selection is based on equivalence, similarity and dissimilarity, synonymy and antonymy, while the combination, the build up of the sequence, is based on contiguity" (Jakobson 1960, p. 358), given that "the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination" (*ibidem*). As shown by Nicolas Ruwet (1987, p. 293), this prevalence characterises also the musical text, which presents the maximum of repetitiveness and the minimum of informativeness because of the "regular reiteration of equivalent units" thus determining what Ruwet (1972, p. 70) describes as "introversive semiosis" (*ibidem*):² all the references of musical signs are enclosed within the higher structure to which they belong as their components, music being its own repository of musical meanings (Krupińska 2014, pp. 253-254). Text accompanying music by necessity follows this

² On Ruwet's semiotic theory of musical discourse and its indebtedness to Jakobson's, cf. Krupińska 2014.

structuring. It can thus be concluded that music and lyrics, interacting in the song, determine a strengthening of the prevalence of the poetic function.

Shifting the focus of this discussion to the kind of language used within this system, it can be observed that while until the 1950s songs mostly showed a clear preference for poetic diction, in more recent times lyrics have tended to exhibit many features of current – and mostly colloquial – usage, often evidently suggestive of a specific context or situation and thus laden with connotations and intimations. Therefore, they offer valuable samples of authentic language.

This means that the language of lyrics tends to be sociolinguistically connoted and bears traces not only of the author's (or singer's) idiolect, but also of diatopic and diastratic variation, while diaphasic variation tends to be hardly there, with the only exception – according to Aleshinskaya (2013, p. 434) – of hip hop songs sometimes containing hip hop jargon related to the professional side of musical life.

These characteristics make lyrics especially interesting as objects of investigation in linguistics and discourse analysis, as authentic language samples as well as specimens of an author's linguistic choices, capable of providing important clues for the description of her/his poetics and artistic identity.

1.2. *Materials and method*

To illustrate this approach, I shall take as a case study the lyrics of some of Bob Dylan's songs, characterized as they are by a diverse linguistic blend combining the sophistication of poetry and text for music with the sociolinguistic complexity of language varieties close to orality and even to the vernacular. In particular, the focus will be on songs produced in the early years of his career, considered especially interesting from the linguistic viewpoint because of the influence of the Folk Music Revival (Mitchell 2007) and of the so called "counterculture movement" (Yinger 1982), determining a committed quality of the texts, in keeping with the typical civil/political engagement prevailing in certain areas of pop music in that period.

While the analysis will be essentially qualitative, an electronic corpus has been constructed of all the lyrics included in Dylan's albums from *Bob Dylan* to *Nashville Skyline* (1961-1970), for a total of 46,461 tokens.³ The software suite Sketch Engine (Kilgarrieff et al. 2014) is used to obtain frequency lists and concordance lines, in order to find the quantitative confirmation of impressions formed with close reading.

³ The edition of reference is *The Lyrics: 1961-2012* (Dylan 2016); occasional reference is also made to *The Writings & Drawings* (Dylan 1973).

In the analysis a sociolinguistic approach will be taken dealing with song lyrics as reflecting contemporary linguistic usage in certain diastatically and diatopically defined sections of society. This will involve an in-depth analysis of the language varieties used in the lyrics and the social and geographical variables with which such varieties are associated.

Song lyrics have attracted less scholarly attention from linguists than their richness as authentic data would have suggested. Research has been largely interdisciplinary, with contributions from stylistics (West 2019), musical pedagogy, musicology and literature (Parada-Cabaleiro, Mayerl, Brandl 2024; Pence 2011; Negus and Astor 2015), psychology (e.g. Barradas, Sakka 2022). More numerous are works focusing on case studies, looking at various authors or working on larger corpora, as Pettijohn and Sacco's (2009) analysis of a number of popular *Billboard* songs or Brand, Acerbi and Mesoudi's (2019) essay on the evolution of 50 years of song lyrics.

If then one turns attention to research on Dylan's songs, there is an immense body of studies, but many of them lean towards information, entertainment or popularization, being addressed to a general "lay" public, or deal with his songs from the viewpoint of the themes, the literary values, the political impact etc., while less attention is given to the lyrics as textual objects and their linguistic and discursive characteristics.

In the next section, some background information on Dylan's work will be given, before going on to look at the possible applications of the approach exemplified here.

2. An introduction to Dylan's poetics

In the early days of his career, Dylan's production was close to the Folk Music Revival, consisting of ballads, blues, topical songs, songs on pacifist, anti-racist and anti-capitalist themes, accompanied only by harmonica and guitar. After the 'electrification' (in 1965, cf. Wald 2015), he evolved towards more distinctly existential subjects, though not abandoning themes of civil commitment. Soon, the linguistic setting of the lyrics opened up to suggestions outside the world of music and songs, and in particular to the influence of the most diverse genres of poetic texts. Initially, inspiration came mainly from some of the poets of the Beat Generation, Jack Kerouac, Peter Orlovsky and especially Allen Ginsberg, with whom Dylan collaborated actively in the early 1970s. From Ginsberg he learnt the ability to abandon himself to the flow of apparently unconnected images in what can be described as "dada" style, the combination of apocalyptic and elegiac tones obtained through everyday language use, the visionary mood conveying an individualist, anarchic rebellion against the banality and degradation of contemporary society.

But Dylan is a cultured and eclectic artist, and over time his lyrics would host influences from many important poets of the English and American tradition, from Robert Browning to T.S. Eliot, from Walt Whitman to E.E. Cummings.⁴ This is one of the innovative and distinguishing features of Dylan's production, which eventually resulted in a definitive change in the status of lyrics in pop music, as confirmed by his award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016, preceded by a nomination for the same prize in 1997.

He was, and still is, an incredibly prolific artist. In the 1960s, he wrote and published over 250 songs (cf. Heylin 2009: "Contents"), most of which in the blues and folk tradition, in the wake of Woody Guthrie, but with ever more substantial intakes from gospel, country, traditional pop and, above all, rock.

His songs deal with multiple themes, among them there are love songs – often songs of farewell or of disdain –, songs of commitment, with a critique of the modern age, expressing pacifist anti-nuclear-war and anti-capitalist ideals, but also songs featuring what has been defined "crazy surreal" or "dada". Overall, these choices defied the conventions of pop music and created a personal style that appealed to the counterculture of the times, although he always denied a militancy. Nonetheless, songs like "Blowin' in the Wind" and "The Times They Are A-Changing" became anthems of the anti-war and civil rights movement.

2.1. Stylistic features realising the "poetic" function

Dylan's lyrics are characterised by a complex linguistic mixture always resting on a base of everyday, strongly colloquial, unadorned language, even though in his production there are texts in standard AmE, often with sporadic traits of orality and informal usage, as for instance the celebrated text of *Blowin' in the Wind*, which features standard English usage except for the annotation of two colloquial phonetic variants (*blowin'* for *blowing*, and *'n'* for *and*), or *Love Minus Zero No Limits*, with the double subject (the so called "pronominal apposition": see §2.2 below) in the repeated sentence starting with "My love she ..." (e.g. "My love she speaks like silence ... My love she laughs like the flowers ...").

The tones of plain everyday speech always predominate in the ballads, in the blues, in many of the texts on existential and everyday subjects, all the more frequent in his early production, where the choice of lower variants of the language reflects the conventions of the musical genres that inspired him or that he directly practiced, and their roots in working-class or rural America.

⁴ On this aspect, cf. the Chapter "Don't Steal, Don't Lift. Appropriation, Artifice, Originality" in Yaffe 2011, pp. 93-124.

The use of these traits typical of spoken language is enhanced by his unique “grain of voice” (“grain de la voix”; cf. Barthes 1962), described “like sand and glue” by David Bowie (1971) and as “frankly nasal, as if sandpaper could sing” by Joyce Carol Oates (2004).

However, recourse to colloquial and popular – sometimes even sub-standard – forms, typical of socially and geographically marked language, does not detract from the poetic quality of the texts characterised as they are by a dense rhythm and sound texture and rich in vivid images, often boldly juxtaposed with no obvious semantic connections between them, although in many cases connections do emerge thanks to intertextual references or in performance by virtue of the combination with music.

A case in point is “Desolation Row” which hosts and distorts, indeed overturns, in a nightmarish and violent atmosphere, some of the most deeply ingrained *topoi* in Western culture – romantic love, the genius of science, the Good Samaritan – and a crowd of characters taken both from the real world (Bettie Davis, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Einstein) and from the most disparate literary sources, from fairy tales (Cinderella) to Shakespeare (Romeo, Ophelia) and Casanova, from the Bible (Cain and Abel, the Good Samaritan) to fiction, be it bourgeois novels (The Hunchback of Notre Dame) or popular horror stories (The Phantom of the Opera). This set of disconnected images is difficult to compose, but their meaning emerges quite unexpectedly from intertextual reference to Eliot’s *Waste Land* (2022/2002), with a clue in the very title of the song, “Desolation Row” which can be interpreted an urban rephrasing of it, an idea that is reinforced by various echoes from the fundamental images of that poem: the mythical image, taken from the Tarot, of the Hanged Man in the first stanza; the myth of death by water in the image of the sinking Titanic (verses 97 ff. of *The Waste Land*) and then again the echo of verses 156 and 157 (“You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique / (And her only thirty-one”) in the description of Ophelia (“For her I feel so afraid / On her 22nd birthday / She already is an old maid”: vv. 37-40), expectations for the rain that bring regeneration and rebirth as an alternative to the impure ritual of sex, the “fortune-telling lady” an obvious reference to Mme Sosostriis, who no longer even attempts to predict the future (vv. 27-28). In linguistic terms, an interesting aspect of these lyrics is that, as is made evident in the last stanza preceded by a piece played on the harmonica, the whole song before that interlude is the content of a letter, i.e. text in a position of projection (Halliday 1985/1994, 227-230), and has the orderly formal quality of written language in spite of the chaotic contents, while in the last few lines the language becomes colloquial and uncultured (“I can’t read too good”: fourth to last verse) coming from the voice of the narrating self, who – again – is reminiscent of Tyresias in the *Waste Land* (“I Tiresias, though blind ...”). Here recourse to sub-standard linguistic expressions as a stylistic trait obviously serves to further contextualise the

narrative in social terms. This is an interesting modulation of language as a function of register, once more testifying to Dylan's mastery in handling linguistic resources.

Going back to the discussion of the general characteristics of the lyrics, and in particular to their metrical structure, the rhythm of Dylan's texts is mostly fluent and rapid, broken up into short verses, a fact that was noticed and appreciated by Allen Ginsberg who wrote about him:

Sincerest form of flattery / is imitation they say
I've broken my long line down / to write a song your way.⁵

In many texts there is an evident attention for rhymes and assonances, which are often there (e.g. in the ballads), although not always in orderly succession. Many of the lyrics are embellished by frequent recourse to rhetorical figures: an immense repertoire of metaphors, prosopopoeia ("Then the sands will roll out / a carpet of gold": "When the Ship Comes In"), similes often proposed in apparently incongruous combinations (e.g. "with your sheets *like* metal and your belt *like* lace": "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands"), synesthesia (cf. "Chimes of Freedom"). As befits texts for music, there are also very frequent anaphoras and all figures of repetition as well as syntactic parallelisms, often protracted for the entire song (think for example of "Blowin' in the Wind"), all stylistic features inspired by the ballad and the blues, but also by Ginsberg and the Bible.

Another noteworthy and distinctive recurring stylistic feature is the use of complex noun phrases, often in the form "N Ø N" with unusual combinations, obviously borrowed from Ginsberg: for instance, *cathedral evening*, *mercury mouth*, *warehouse eyes*, *geranium kiss*, *corpse evangelists*, *confusion boats*, *jingle jangle morning*. See the following example, which also features three interesting similes (underlined):

With your *mercury mouth* in the missionary times
And your eyes like smoke and your prayers like rhymes
And your silver cross, and your voice like chimes [...]
(*"Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands"*, ll. 1-3).

Another form of atypical noun phrases is "N of N": *mouth of a graveyard*, *Rivers of blindness*, *the pockets of chance*, *bordertowns of despair*, *child of clay*, *the disease of conceit*, *the tombstones of damage*, etc. (cf. Khalifa 2007: 171). For instance:

Blind man breakin' out of a trance
Puts both his hands *in the pockets of chance*

⁵ 'On Reading Dylan's Writings', in Ginsberg 1975, p. 122.

Hopin' to find one circumstance
Of dignity
("Dignity" ll. 17-20)

2.2. *The sociolinguistic dimension*

The sociolinguistic identification of a specific language variety used by Dylan in his lyrics is a quite complex problem, even restricting the analysis to one single decade in his production. What variety of AmE he uses and whether he retains any traits of the idiom of his region of origin has been an object of heated debate for decades, with no conclusive results.

In Dylan's diction – as will be discussed in more detail shortly – there appear elements from many disparate geographical and social varieties. This is further complicated by the fact that diatopic varieties in AmE are relatively less diversified than those of some other languages like Italian, as one does not find true full-fledged dialects,⁶ but varieties characterised by sub-standard traits and slang that are largely transversal, albeit with regional variants, and often associated with social variation (think, for example, of African-American English)⁷. Wolfram and Schilling give an extensive inventory of such traits in the appendix ("An Inventory of Distinguishing Dialect Features") to their book on American English, and describe them as significant in terms of the continuum between the standard and the vernacular, being representative of both social and regional variation (Wolfram and Schilling 2016, p. 367).

The language of Dylan's lyrics has been explored in a handful of specific studies, mostly quantitatively-oriented. Among others, Khalifa (2007) looks at vocabulary, verb forms and noun phrases and identifies a combination of Germanic vocabulary, Romance syntactic patterns and rural archaic British constructions in Dylan's language, which he sees as composing "an ambitious vision of universal focus". Working on a corpus from 1962 to 2012, Schmidtke (2013) finds that in terms of lexical density there are no major variations over time, nor changes in the preference for

⁶ It should be noted that in the Italian/Romance sociolinguistic tradition, the term "dialect" indicates "an autonomous language system ... that has structural characters and a history distinct from those of the national language" as is the case for languages like Italian and Spanish, as well as "a spoken variety of the national language, i.e. a variety of the same system ... having the same structural characters and history as the national language" (Dardano 1997, pp. 171) and characterised by certain variation with respect to it, as is the case with most dialects of English. Cf. Wolfram and Schilling 2005, pp. 2-3. In this study the word is used here with the latter meaning.

⁷ AAE is described as "a supra-regional vernacular norm comprising a set of distinctive traits that are shared wherever AAE is used in the United States". See Wolfram and Schilling (2005, p. 232).

verb tenses (past, present, future), the frequency of which remains virtually unchanged. In slight contrast, but taking the perspective of music psychology, Czechowski, Sylvestre and Miranda (2016, pp. 103-110), who work with a psychological-research-oriented software program combined with a qualitative inductive method, find a change in the choice of vocabulary in terms of semantic areas, in particular identifying a greater proportion of words that were indicative of cognitive complexity and religious content as Dylan's career progressed, – findings that are not directly relevant to this study, limited as it is to the first decade of the artist's activity. In a more recent stylometric study, Zheyuan Dai and Haitao Liu (2024) look at parts of speech and find that based on the distribution of verbs and adjectives the lyrics are significantly active and dynamic texts characterised by prominent individualism with a wide use of the first-person singular pronouns.

As far as diatopic variation is concerned, as pointed out above, Dylan's AmE is difficult to define in geographical and social terms, not least because to some extent his accent varies between performances, so much so that it has often been a subject of debate. Although he grew up in a middle-class Jewish family in the area of the United States known as Upper Midwest, for many listeners his accent and his use of the language are not easily framed within the variety of AmE spoken there, conventionally referred to as North Central AmE (Labov, Ash and Boberg 2006, p. 145ff.), because of the many personal traits that may be due to elements of the Southern variety, perhaps acquired through his practice of folk and country music and the blues, openly influenced by Southern and African-American cultures

In a chapter of his extensive (and partisan) study on Dylan's language, Pichaske (2010, p. 63ff.) analyses his American in the light of linguistic works specifically focused on the speech of the Upper Midwest (Allen 1976; Underwood 1981), and identifies a few traits typical of the American of that region, especially the recurrence of certain lexical clusters, the preference for the use of certain lexemes rather than other synonymous or competing ones (e.g. *sundown* rather than *sunset*, *dawn* rather than *sunrise*, *parlor* rather than *living room*, *gasket* rather than *coffin*, etc.) and recourse to certain typical idiomatic variants such as *somewheres* (which, however, is a hapax). Pichaske's analysis, however biased and working on small numbers, shows that after all Dylan's idiolect rests at least in minimum part on a substratum typical of his area of origin.

Moving on to a more detailed analysis, Dylan's lyrics have all the features that are typical of oral language scripts and feature a number of deviations from standard usage. Consonant and vowel reductions, elisions and contractions are recorded in the texts as well as in the scores. Of course, the written text is the transcription of the singer's actual pronunciation of certain words and expressions through non-standard orthography (Schalley *et al.* 2014), but establishes that pronunciation as an integral part of the song, to

be reproduced as such in any further performance by others.

See for instance the following lines from “Bob Dylan’s New Orleans Rag” featuring a number of contractions and reductions (in italics):

I was *sittin’* on a stump
Down in New Orleans
I was *feelin’ kinda* low down
Dirty and mean
Along came a *fella*...
 (“Bob Dylan’s New Orleans Rag”)

Reductions like *kinda* for *kind of* and *fella* for *fellow*, which recur several times, and other similar ones are essentially phonological in kind, while in other cases – like *sittin’* and *feelin’* in the example above – the phonological component may also take on grammatical significance.

These two present participles – *sittin’* and *feelin’* – are examples of the so called g-dropping or ING variable (Hazen 2005), the process in English whereby in unstressed environments the *-ing* ending is pronounced with an alveolar nasal [n] instead of a velar nasal [ŋ]. It is shown in the conventional non-standard orthography by the use of an apostrophe in place of <g>, as in *walkin’* and *nothin’*.⁸ Its frequency varies as a function of sociolinguistic variables, being especially associated with both a lower socioeconomic status and an informal speech style, while in the US it is more common in Southern speakers. In the Dylan corpus a search for «*in’» yields 718 hits, with a frequency of 1.5%, and apart from very few exceptions (*mornin’*: 12 hits; *somethin’*: 8 hits) the g-dropping regards the *-ing* desinence of the present participle. It can be considered to function as a pervasive mark of colloquiality.

In the following example there are instances of g-dropping both in the present participle and the indefinite pronoun:

Well, ev’rybody’s got *somethin’*
That they’re *lookin’* forward to
I’m *lookin’* forward to when I can do it all again
And babe, I’ll do it all over you
 (“All over You”)

A similar potentially grammatical impact has the contraction of semi-modals, i.e. the distinction of (BE) *going to* vs *gonna* and (HAVE) *got to* vs *gotta* (Krug 2000; Pullum 1997) which are recurrent forms in spoken language in informal registers.

⁸ As Wolfram and Schilling (2016, p. 76) aptly observe, the denomination g-dropping is somewhat misleading as “the process really involves the substitution of one nasal sound for another rather than the loss of a sound” all the more so as the <g> is never actually pronounced.

In this case there is a process of evolution from phonological to lexical variation, that is, the contracted forms are developing from pronunciation variants to independent items. See the following example:

Well, you can run down to the White House
 You can gaze at the Capitol Dome, pretty mama
 You can pound on the President's gate
 But you *oughta* know by now it's *gonna* be too late
 You're *gonna* need
 You're *gonna* need my help someday
 Well, if you can't quit your sinnin'
 ("Please quit your low down ways (Quit Your Low Down Ways)", *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, 1963)

While *oughta* is simply a local phonetic contraction, the phonetic reduction of the English semi-modal (*BE*) *going to* into *gonna*, is well known to linguists (Pullum 1997, Krug 2000), and is so frequent as a mark of colloquial register in AmE that it has been interpreted as being on its way to changing from pronunciation variant to independent item in what has been called as an "emancipation" process (Lorenz 2012, 2013). *Gonna* is rather common in the corpus, with 104 occurrences against 13 of the full semi-modal (*BE*) *going to*, to which 52 occurrences of *a-gonna* have to be added (see below).

Gotta, the parallel reduced form of (HAVE) *got to*, is much less common and in the corpus is used as frequently as the full form, with 114 occurrences against 113, as exemplified in the following stanza:

But if *you got to go*
 It's all right
 But if *you got to go*, go now
 Or else *you gotta stay* all night
 ("But if you got to go, go now (Or else you gotta stay all night)", *Another Side of Bob Dylan*)

Here the alternation of *got to* (2 occurrences) and *gotta* (1 occurrence) exemplifies the co-existence of the two forms in the corpus.

As regards *gonna* and its frequency, as pointed out above, there are 52 occurrences of *a-gonna* to be added. This form provides an instance of another interesting linguistic feature, clearly archaic and always intended to echo certain varieties of popular speech, the so-called "*a*-prefixing on *ing*-forms" or "*a*- *ing* circumfix" graphically annotated with <a> to precede an *ing* form⁹ (often realised as *-in'*), for example:

For the times they are *a-changin'*

⁹ Of course, in the case of *a-gonna* the *-ing* desinence does not appear as such, but in its reduced form *gonna* in combination with *-to*.

Women screamin,' fists *a-flyin*,' babies cryin' / Cops *a-comin*,' me *a-runnin*.'
(‘Talkin’ Bear Mountain Picnic Massacre Blues’)

Then you heard my voice *a-singin*’ and you know my name / I’m *a-wonderin*’
if the leaders of the nations understand
(“Train A-Travelin”)

This is the weakened outcome of the ancient locative form of the progressive: *he is on hunting* > *he is a-hunting* > *he is hunting*, which has been on the wane since the 1700s (Mossé 1938, p. 106ff.), but is still common in some vernacular varieties of American as well as British English. In the 1961-1970 corpus there appear as many as 202 occurrences of *a*-prefixed *-ing* forms (0.43%),¹⁰ with *a-gonna* being the most frequent. In geographical terms, it is difficult to localize its distribution. Certainly it is recognized as a trait of informal American¹¹, but is pervasive in East Anglian English, and widely present in Appalachian English, where it has been extensively studied (Wolfram 1976), in Bahamian English, in African American Vernacular English, and still present, but rare in Manx and Welsh English, in Southwest and Southeast of England dialects, and in Newfoundland English (cf. Kortmann *et al.* 2020.) Thus, more than anything else, frequent recourse to this trait provides evidence of informal/vernacular usage also characteristic of the folk song tradition in which Dylan recognised himself for a period of his career, continuing to draw inspiration from it also in the later stages.

An interesting trait that emerges from an observation of the concordances of *a*-prefixed *-ing* (or *-in*’) forms, obtained by searching the corpus for “*a*” followed by dash and a wildcard (*a-**), is the fact that *a-gonna* is preceded – with the exception of only 7 cases – by *ain’t*, which is one of the most typical and recurrent forms marked for social class and informality in English.

Ain’t is a very common form of negation in the lyrics, occurring 175 times (0.38%). As is well known, it is “a non-standard construction commonly used (especially in AmE) in place of *am not*, *is not*, *are not*, *has not* and *have not*” (Quirk *et al.* 1985, p. 129n.). Stigmatized by prescriptivists (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002, p. 1611), it has been observed to be

¹⁰ This finding appears in contradiction with data given by Khalifa (2007, p. 172) for his corpus of 401 songs from Dylan’s early days to 2007 (111,555 words, 8,170 tokens), who found only 274 occurrences of *a*- prefixing in nearly twice as many songs as those in the corpus considered here, produced over a much wider span of time. This discrepancy may be explained either with the fact that Khalifa’s corpus comprised a selection of songs and not the complete production of the artist in the time period covered, or with the hypothesis that the number of these forms is more limited in Dylan’s later production, an aspect that has not been confirmed by research so far and will be ascertained in the further stages of this research.

¹¹ For a detailed study of the linguistic, social, and geographic distribution of *a*-prefixing data in North America cf. Burkette and Antieau 2022, based on the results of the Linguistic Atlas Project (LAP) of North America.

pervasively present in many varieties of English, being more associated with working-class speech in Britain, and considered more as a mark of colloquiality, but not (except jocularly) in academic contexts, in the US.

For instance, according to Kortmann, Lunkenheimer and Ehret (2020), *ain't* as the negated form of BE and *ain't* as the negated form of HAVE are attested respectively in 44% and 43% of the varieties of English they analyse in their *Electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English*, with a pervasiveness index of 60% and 59% (cf. also Palacios Martínez 2013, p. 213).

In the lyrics it appears prevalently as the negated form of BE (162 occurrences), in many cases followed by *gonna* or *a-gonna*, and is often used with a first-person singular pronoun as subject (46 occurrences), for example:

Ain't it hard to stumble
And land in some funny lagoon?
("Outlaw Blues")

Oh, ye playboys and playgirls
Ain't a-gonna run my world
Ain't a-gonna run my world
("Playboys and playgirls" *Another Side of Bob Dylan*)

I'll just say fare thee well
I ain't sayin' you treated me unkind
You could have done better but I don't mind
("Don't Think Twice It's Allright" *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*)

In a few cases *ain't* functions as a negated form of HAVE, often (but not always) followed by *got*:

He *ain't* got no name
But it *ain't* him to blame
He's only a pawn in their game
("Only a Pawn in Their Game" *The Times They Are A-Changin'*)

Well, I *ain't* got my childhood
Or friends I once did know [...]
No, I *ain't* got no armies
To jump at my command
("Guess I'm Doin' Fine" *The Times They are A-Changin'*)

Given the transversal geographical distribution of this linguistic trait, it is evident that more than anything else it is used as a mark of informal or colloquial orality.

This is reinforced by the fact that recourse to this form of negation is mostly accompanied by patently sub-standard forms, of which some examples can be found in the excerpts just quoted: use of the adjective for the adverb (you treated me *unkind*), double negation (He *ain't* got *no* name, I

ain't got *no* armies), but instances are numerous in mostly all the lyrics being discussed in this work.

See some other examples of double negation:

There's too much confusion, *I can't get no relief* ("All Along the Watch Tower")

These things *don't happen*
No more, nowadays
 ("Long Ago, Far Away")

An example of recourse to sub-standard forms is the use of *to lay* for *to lie*, as in the title "Lay, Lady, lay" where, of course, the correct form *lie* wouldn't create the same "pun effect". It also appears in other songs:

I'd *lay* awake all night ('If not for you')

Lay down and die ('Neighbourhood bully'),

also in the past participle *laid* instead of *lain*:

where my love and I had *laid* ('One too many mornings')

Have you ever *laid* awake at night and wondered 'bout the same?
 (Train A-Travelin', *Bob Dylan*)

Non-standard variations in verb conjugation are also not infrequent:

it don't take long to find out... ('Talking New York')

why *don't she tell* / 'stead of turnin' by back t' my face?
 ("I don't believe you (she acts *like* we never met)")

and so are errors in many other adverbial and verbal forms, e.g.:

I can't read *too good* ('Desolation Row')

and the words that are used / *for to get* the ship confused ('When the Ship Comes In')

It don't matter 'bout his position, *it don't matter* 'bout his lifestyle
 (Ain't No Man Righteous, No Not One)

The bed it was bare
 And *I's left* alone with three children ("North Country Blues")

Also quite common are incorrect or hypercorrect verb forms, also found in the lyrics of Woody Guthrie and other folk singers, e.g., *knowed*:

It ain't no use in turnin' on your light, babe
 That light *I never knowed*
 ('Don't Think Twice, It's Alright').

or the use of the past participle as simple past:

For somethin' that *he never done* ('Hurricane').

Another recurring trait is the use of the verbal operator *do* in positive clauses where no emphasis is meant; Khalifa (2007, p. 173) finds 77 occurrences of it in his corpus, or 11% of all occurrences of *do*, for instance:

Next animal that *he did meet* / Had wool on his back and hooves on
 his feet
 ('Man Gave Names to All The Animals')

Achilles is in your alleyway, / He don't want me here, / *He does brag* /
 He's pointing to the sky / And he's hungry, like a man in drag /
 ("Temporary like Achilles")

Outside in the distance a wildcat *did growl*, / Two riders were
 approaching, the wind began to howl. ("All Along the Watchtower")

In some instances, the *done* form accompanies a past tense to indicate the completion of the action: this is the so-called "completive done" (Wolfram and Schilling 2016, p. 378), typical of African American Vernacular English, which perhaps Dylan absorbed from his familiarity with the blues, for example:

Her and her boyfriend went to California, / Her and her boyfriend *done*
changed their tune ('Sign on the Window')

another man *done gone* ('Waitin' for You').

Turning to intraclausal organisation, noteworthy is the recurrence of the so-called "pronominal apposition" i.e. 'the use of a co-referential pronoun in addition to a noun in subject position' (Wolfram and Schilling 2016, p. 388) which is a common feature of sub-standard American English in many of its regional varieties, for instance:

The line it is drawn / *the curse it* is cast ('The times they are a-changin')

Queen Mary she's my friend ('Just Like a Woman')

Oh *my name it* is nothing ('With God on Our Side')

All your seasick sailors they are rowing home ('It's All Over Now Baby Blue').

In a study of the correlation between pronominal apposition and g-dropping in Detroit, Wolfram and Schilling (2016, p. 168) find that a speaker from the lower working class is more likely to use both *-in'* for *-ing* and pronominal apposition than speakers from other classes.

Overall, the main finding emerging from this detailed discussion of the linguistic aspects of Dylan's lyrics is an overall tendency to include in his texts a range of linguistic features from the informal through to the vernacular and the uneducated, with a lower or higher frequency in different songs arguably as a function of various variables (the topic, the genre, the musical form, etc.).

3. Conclusion

What clearly emerges from the case study focusing on the distinctive features of the language variety used by Dylan in his lyrics is a confirmation of its heterogeneity, which defies all attempts to refer it to a single geographical or social variety, being largely composite and to some extent unstable. In most cases he chooses to use a kind of language that connotes itself as non-mainstream rather than regional, and is modulated to suit the theme and the musical genre of each song.

Initially influenced by the voices of the Folk Revival, Dylan politically and polemically disassociates himself from the establishment, preferring intimate, colloquial language that breaks with the rules of formality or choosing to be linguistically close to the lower classes, the marginalised and their subcultures. An extensive repertoire of informal, colloquial, and/or vernacular forms, in some cases sub-standard, is combined with poetic elements (in Jakobson's sense). The only real constant is the oral, colloquial quality of the texts and the tendency to deviate from what is expected.

In this respect, it can be useful to borrow from Sunstein (2022) the notion of "dishabituation". Music can be dishabituating, in other words when habit has reduced people's responsiveness to facts, things, problems, feelings, music can help re-awaken their reactivity. In this respect, Dylan is typically and systematically dishabituating. He never conforms to expectations, even those he himself has created with his previous songs. He deals with the favourite themes and uses the patterns and melodies of Country music, of the Folk Revival, of the counterculture of his times, but refuses to subscribe officially to them. As Hampton (2019, p. 13) points out, "Dylan's own art, from its very first manifestations, has consistently questioned, taken apart, and criticized every feature of the very culture that made it possible". And he also does so, consistently, in his use of the English language.

Thus, drawing some conclusions from this sociolinguistic analysis of the lyrics, it can be stated that the findings from a detail discussion grounded on quantitative data identify some salient aspects of Dylan's lyrics (1961-1970), shedding light on important peculiarities of his work and poetics that would not emerge as clearly from a traditional close reading. Furthermore, from the analysis an important lesson can also be learnt about some of the main linguistic features of informal AmE as spoken in everyday situations and/or in culturally deprived contexts. This provides an illustration of the interesting results that can be attained by taking a sociolinguistic approach to the analysis of pop song lyrics.

More in general, the case study has shown the effectiveness of a sociolinguistic approach to the analysis of pop song lyrics, for various reasons.

Firstly, sociolinguistic instruments make it possible to draw a picture of how artists construct their identities in their songs by adopting a language variety (or varieties) that contribute/s to collocating them in social (and ideological) terms and positioning them artistically within the contemporary cultural and musical scenery.

Secondly, pop song lyrics represent an outstanding sample of authentic language on account of their "density"; to gather instances of so many different linguistic features would otherwise require the collection of huge quantities of spontaneous exchanges. Thus lyrics make it possible to identify and analyse phenomena that are peculiar to language in real, informal, colloquial, vernacular or sub-standard usage, as the case may be.

Thirdly, if for the linguist these findings are interesting in themselves, they may also have important didactic implications, providing meaningful teaching materials both for the definition of language varieties in a descriptive linguistics perspective and for practical purposes, offering learners the opportunity to be exposed to informal uses of the language without having to go through large text quantities.

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