

Music, language and identity. The loss of rhoticity in Bob Dylan's Southern American English stylisation in the light of frequency effects

Monika Konert-Panek

University of Warsaw

Singing accents frequently involve some degree of stylisation, the phenomenon that has been extensively analysed in particular with regard to Americanisation of British singing accent (Trudgill 1983, Simpson 1999, Beal 2009, Gibson and Bell 2012, Watts and Morrissey 2019 among others). Some authors (e.g. Sackett 1979, Trudgill 1983) observe that American and Canadian vocalists also style-shift and adopt salient features of Southern American English. This phenomenon has been interpreted not only as an attempt to emulate the pronunciation style of admired folk and blues singers, but also as the symbol of solidarity with the underprivileged.

This topic calls for an interdisciplinary perspective, combining the notions of modern *identity* perceived as a “personal project” (Giddens 1991), *reflexivity* involved in staged performance (Coupland 2007, Bell and Gibson 2011) and *music* understood as “a container for temporal structure of past circumstances” (DeNora 2000: 67). While the above concepts explain fundamental meanings behind singing accent stylisation, phonetic science – accompanied by statistics – offers the tools to describe both the details of the phenomenon, and the potential significance of the observed trends.

This paper focuses on rhoticity loss as part of Bob Dylan's SAE singing accent stylisation. Its aim is to examine the potential significance of frequency effects in this respect and assess whether more frequent words prove to be the best carriers of SAE singing style, favouring the loss of rhoticity. The paper adopts the perspective of usage-based paradigm (Bybee 2001), represented as an exemplar model (Johnson 1997, Pierrehumbert 2001), in which frequency effects and sociophonetic variation occupy central positions.

The quantitative auditory analysis was based on five albums in the artist's history: *Bob Dylan* (1962), *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963), *Nashville Skyline* (1969), *Slow Train Coming* (1979), *Tempest* (2012), divided into two groups, representing distinct tendencies. The first two albums show greater variability in the analysed feature (61 and 42% of rhoticity loss, respectively), while the remaining three albums indicate that the influence of SAE became stronger in the vocalist's style (about 80% of rhoticity loss). Frequency was measured locally, i.e. the word frequency of the sample itself was used, following methodology and argumentation by Hay et al. (1999) and Erker and Guy (2012) regarding “the spirit of usage-based models” and their acknowledgement of individual speakers' linguistic experiences.

All potentially rhotic words were identified as frequent (occurring 5 or more times) or infrequent (occurring fewer than 5 times). In the case of the first corpus (first two albums, 635 tokens), the percentage of frequent words undergoing the change was higher compared with infrequent ones (56% vs. 40%) and the results are statistically significant (Yates' chi-square=15,065, $p < 0.001$). In the second corpus (comprising the remaining three albums, 1083 tokens), the percentage of frequent and infrequent words undergoing the change turned out to be identical (82%) and the statistical analysis showed no difference between the two groups (Yates' chi-square=0,003, $p < 0.99$).

The results suggest that word frequency may affect singing style variation in the establishing period of the dynamic process of stylisation. Next, the feature may be established as the major characteristics of a given performer's style and diffused across the lexicon.

Keywords: frequency effects, popular music, rhoticity, singing accent, stylisation

References

- Beal, J. 2009. "You're not from New York City, you're from Rotherham": Dialect and identity in British indie music. *Journal of English Linguistics* 37(3), 223-240.
- Bell, A. & Gibson, A. 2011. Staging Language: An Introduction to the Sociolinguistics of Performance. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 15 (5), 555–572.
- Bybee, J. 2000. The phonology of the lexicon: evidence from lexical diffusion. In Barlow, M. & Kemmer, M. (Eds.), *Usage-based models of language*, Stanford, CA: CSLI, 65–85.
- Bybee, J. 2001. *Phonology and language use*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bybee, J. 2002. Word frequency and context of use in the lexical diffusion of phonetically conditioned sound change. *Language Variation and Change* 14. 261–290.
- Coupland, N. 2007. *Style: Language Variation and Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- DeNora, T. 2000. *Music in Everyday Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Erker, D. & Guy, G. R. 2012. The role of lexical frequency in syntactic variability: Variable subject personal pronoun expression in Spanish. *Language* 88 (3), 526-557.
- Gibson, A. & Bell, A. 2012. Popular music singing as referee design. In Hernández-Campoy, J. M. & Cutillas-Espinosa, J. A. (Eds.), *Style-Shifting in Public. New perspectives on stylistic variation*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 139-164.
- Giddens, A. 1991. *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge: Polity Press (in association with Blackwell Publishing Ltd.).
- Hay, J., Jannedy, S. & Mendoza-Denton, N. 1999. Oprah and /ay/: lexical frequency, referee design and style, *Proceedings of the 14th International Congress of Phonetic Studies 1999* (San Francisco, USA), 1389-1392.
- Hooper, J. B. 1976. Word frequency in lexical diffusion and the source of morphophonological change. In Christie, W. (Ed.), *Current Progress in Historical Linguistics*, Amsterdam: NorthHolland, 96-105.
- Johnson, K. 1997. Speech perception without speaker normalization: An exemplar model. In Johnson, K. & Mullennix, J. (Eds.), *Talker Variability in Speech Processing*, San Diego: Academic Press, 145-165.
- Pierrehumbert, J. B. 2001. Exemplar dynamics: Word frequency, lenition, and contrast. In Bybee, J. & Hopper, P. (Eds.), *Frequency effects and the emergence of lexical structure*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 137-157.
- Sackett, S. J. 1979. Prestige Dialect and the Pop Singer. *American Speech* 54 (3), 234-237.
- Shockey, L. 2003. *Sound Patterns of Spoken English*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Simpson, P. 1999. Language, culture and identity. With (another) look at accents in pop and rock singing. *Multilingua* 18 (4), 343-367.
- Trudgill, P. 1983. Acts of Conflicting Identity. The Sociolinguistics of British Pop-Song Pronunciation. In Trudgill, P. (Ed.), *On Dialect. Social and Geographical Perspectives*, Oxford: Blackwell, 141-160.
- Watts, R. J. & Morrissey, F. A. 2019. *Language, the Singer and the Song. The Sociolinguistics of Folk Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.